

Reviews of Papua New Guinea and West Papua are not included in this issue.

FIJI

For the people of Fiji, the year 2000 was the most turbulent and traumatic in recent memory. The country endured an armed takeover of parliament and a hostage crisis lasting fifty-six days, the declaration of martial law and abrogation of the 1997 constitution, and a bloody mutiny in the armed forces. These events raised the specter of civil war and economic collapse, international ostracism, and a future plagued with uncertainty and hardship. Comparisons with the coups of 1987 were inevitable, but most observers would conclude that the crisis of 2000 left Fiji more adrift and divided than ever before.

The month of May has become synonymous with coups in Fiji. It was on 14 May 1987 the country witnessed its first military *coup d'état*, led by then Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. On 19 May 2000 a group of nine gunmen attempted to repeat history, by taking hostage Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his People's Coalition government. While the precise details of who was involved and how the takeover was to be executed are still to be revealed, the gunmen who stormed parliament were no doubt banking on the support of various antigovernment forces to ensure they carried the day.

The campaign to oust Mahendra Chaudhry from office, which began covertly soon after the historic elec-

tion of May 1999, became more overt in the early months of 2000. Fijian political parties, led by the former governing party, *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT), held meetings around the country to discuss ways to oppose if not depose the government and thereby return to power. These meetings helped fuel indigenous Fijian unease and animosity toward Chaudhry's leadership. Signaling its move toward a more nationalist stance, the SVT terminated its coalition with the Indo-Fijian-based National Federation Party in February, describing the coalition as "self-defeating."

In March, the Taukei Movement was revived with the aim, according to spokesman Apisai Tora, of "removing the government through various legal means as soon as possible" (*Sun*, 3 May 2000, 1). In 1987 the Taukei Movement had spearheaded nationalist opposition to, and destabilization of, the then Labor Coalition government. In 2000, the movement's battle cry was familiar: the People's Coalition government was not working in the interests of the indigenous people.

Tora's role in the Taukei Movement was a dramatic turnabout from his 1999 position, when he led one of the Labor Party's coalition partners, the Party of National Unity (PANU). Tora lost his bid for a seat in parliament, and subsequently blamed his defeat on Chaudhry's decision to field a Labor candidate against him. In January he announced his resignation as PANU secretary. This followed an unsuccessful attempt in September 1999 to pull the party out of the

coalition, a move that was rebuffed by PANU's four parliamentarians.

Splits deepened within all the Fijian-based parties in the People's Coalition, and between those parliamentarians and cabinet ministers loyal to Chaudhry and those opposed to his leadership. Labor's relations with its principal coalition partner, the Fijian Association Party (FAP), became especially fraught. With the deputy prime minister and FAP leader, Adi Kuini Speed, away on medical leave, the party leadership was taken over by backbencher Ratu Tu'akitau Cokanautu, a vocal critic of Chaudhry. In April a special general meeting of the FAP endorsed its withdrawal from the People's Coalition, but this was decided in the absence of the party's four cabinet ministers.

Anti-Labor and anti-Chaudhry sentiment was fueled by a number of contentious policy initiatives taken by the government. These included the Constitutional Amendment Bill, introduced in the House of Representatives in February. It proposed fifteen changes to the constitution, some of which the SVT had put forward when it was in power. Fijian critics claimed that the bill would dilute the power of the Senate and by implication that of the Great Council of Chiefs, as well as weaken other Fijian institutions, particularly in respect to advising the president. On the other hand, the bill alienated human rights and civil society groups by its attempt to remove constitutional provisions prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Also controversial was the government's Social Justice and Affirmative Action Bill. Among other things it proposed that assistance programs

previously limited to indigenous Fijians and Rotumans (such as Fijian Development Bank loans) be opened up to other races. Despite advice even from some allies, the government persisted with the proposed legislation. Leading the opposition to the bill was Senator Laisenia Qarase, a nominee of the Great Council of Chiefs in the Senate. His argument, which echoed that of other critics, was that removing special assistance for Fijians in commerce and industry, aimed at closing the gaps between the races, would lead to ethnic tensions and political instability. He labeled the government's approach "arrogant, belligerent and provocative" (*Sun*, 14 Mar 2000, 3). This led to a highly public feud, conducted through newspaper advertisements, between Qarase and the government, with the latter accusing Qarase of "running an orchestrated propaganda campaign to discredit the government based on lies and distortion" (*Review*, April, 17).

Perhaps most sensitive of all, however, was the government's land policy. The stand-off between the government and the Native Land Trust Board (NLTB) on the future of land leases continued into 2000. The urgency of resolving this issue was underscored by a report that up to 95 percent of cane leases, due to expire before 2002, would not be renewed (*Sun*, 16 Mar 2000, 1). Chaudhry's determination to retain the Agriculture Landlord and Tenant Act (ALTA) provided potent ammunition to his critics, eager to read in his actions a bias toward the interests of Indo-Fijian farmers. One newly formed organization, the Foundation of the Indigenous Fijian People, under the leadership of Rewa parliamentarian

Ratu Timoci Silatolu, warned non-indigenous Fijian leaders to refrain from commenting on ALTA. Another Chaudhry opponent, NLTB General Manager Maika Qarikau, was reportedly busy meeting provincial councils around the country, feeding antigovernment sentiment over land issues.

A key platform of the government's land policy was the proposal to set up a Land Use Commission. According to Chaudhry, the proposal aimed to deal with the problem of unused land. "The land can be developed and used to obtain a return for those who own it" (*Times*, 8 Mar 2000, 1). Critics, including Vice President Ratu Josefa Iloilo, described the proposal as an attempt to impose state control over land use, thus denying landowners their rightful ownership. A government-sponsored visit to Malaysia by ten chiefs, to observe land use policy there, was labeled "a ploy" to further divide the Fijian people.

Land issues gained greater political salience due to the potentially huge returns that would be realized from the country's vast mahogany plantations. In March it was announced that the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) was the government's preferred strategic partner in the harvesting, processing, and marketing of the resource. The former chairman of Fiji Hardwoods (a company formed in 1997 to manage the plantations), George Speight, had been sacked from his position soon after the 1999 election by Agriculture Minister Poseci Bune. There were allegations of conflict of interest due to Speight's close association with a rival to the CDC—the US-based Anglo-Pacific Corporation (*Sun*, 9 Apr 2000, 15–17). Opposition members of par-

liament condemned the government's choice of CDC, saying it showed that Fijians "have no voice in deciding how their resources will be used" (*Post*, 8 Apr 2000, 2). In April the Great Council of Chiefs requested that the government defer any further decisions on the mahogany question, forming a committee to look into how landowners would benefit from the resource. This was chaired by Senator Qarase.

Fijian mistrust of the government was also stirred by the parliamentary majority it enjoyed. SVT's president and former deputy prime minister, Taufa Vakatale, claimed that the government had such an overwhelming majority that the SVT was powerless in opposition. Labor held 37 seats in the 71-seat parliament, but the total number for the Coalition was 58 seats (including the 3 Christian Democratic Alliance members and 3 independents). According to Vakatale, the only option for the people was to take to the streets.

In April a series of antigovernment marches began. The first, in Lautoka, attracted only about five hundred demonstrators. At the next march in Suva on 28 April, there were an estimated four thousand, led by prominent Fijian politicians and members of parliament. They called for the removal of the "anti-Fijian" government and for its replacement by an indigenous-based government. The demonstrators also called for the 1997 constitution to be replaced by the 1990 constitution. The government's response was to publish full-page advertisements in the daily papers listing all its initiatives to assist indigenous Fijians. When Police Commissioner Isikia Savua warned that the

police would not be able to control future protests, the home affairs minister ordered police not to issue any new permits. This move was overturned by the prime minister, but not before Fijian politicians threatened “to take the law into their own hands” (*Times*, 6 May 2000, 1). Another march was planned for 19 May.

By May there was growing speculation of another coup, with commentators likening the political situation to the lead-up to the coup of May 1987. Army Commander Frank Bainimarama “categorically” denounced such speculation, stating that “the military will not be used in any way to promote the downfall of any legitimate government” (*Post*, 9 Apr 2000, 1). However, media speculation pointed to the more likely possibility of an elite “civilian” coup rather than a 1987-style coup (*Review*, May 2000; *Post*, 15 May 2000, 4). While the government could not ignore such speculation, it did not appear too disturbed. In a mild rebuke to his opposition, Chaudhry remarked, “I hope the people engaged in such disruptive activities will realize that they are doing greater harm to Fiji” (*Post*, 18 May 2000, 1).

Taukei Movement anger was also directed at President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. The movement’s leader, Apisai Tora, castigated the president for not responding directly to a petition calling on him to dismiss the Chaudhry government, appoint an interim government, amend the 1997 constitution, and call new elections. The president’s response had been channeled through the media, where his officials had pointed out that he did not have the power to dismiss a

democratically elected government or to appoint an interim government (*Post*, 6 May 2000, 1). The first anniversary of the People’s Coalition Government occurred on Friday 19 May. The government celebrated with a special morning tea in their parliamentary offices. As parliament resumed its sitting that morning, about two thousand protesters gathered in downtown Suva to demonstrate once again their opposition to the Chaudhry government. Meanwhile a small group of armed men, wearing civilian clothes, made their way to parliament in two vehicles. At about 10:30 AM they burst into the parliamentary chamber, handcuffing government members and taking them prisoner. On hearing of the armed hold-up, the antigovernment demonstrators marched to the gates of parliament, where they formed a human shield. Later that morning rioting broke out in Suva. Looting and arson continued unchecked for the remainder of the day.

The spokesman for the armed group soon revealed himself as George Speight, the former head of Fiji Hardwoods. He announced that a “civilian coup” had taken place, carried out by “soldiers of the *vanua*” on behalf of the indigenous people, and that as a result the constitution was suspended as were the powers of the president. Appearing at his side (and named as the interim prime minister) was FAP parliamentarian, Timoci Silatolu. Also prominent in early negotiations with Speight’s group were SVT leader Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, acting FAP leader Ratu Tu’akitau, and former prime minister and current chairman of the Great Council of Chiefs Sitiveni

Rabuka. When asked by the media whether he supported the takeover, Kubuabola declined to comment and instead called for calm. The situation was confused further when neither the army nor the police appeared willing to stop the looting on the streets of Suva. While an announcement from the military headquarters indicated that the army did not accept the takeover and continued to recognize Chaudhry as prime minister, the army also claimed to be awaiting instructions from the Ministry of Home Affairs. But Home Affairs in turn claimed to be awaiting word from the new “interim Home Affairs minister,” named as Raquita Valalalabure.

A semblance of authority was finally imposed when President Ratu Mara spoke to the nation later that day and announced a state of emergency. He described the takeover bid as unlawful and pledged to do his utmost to resolve the situation. This included addressing the issues that had caused the unrest (namely indigenous Fijian concerns). He called for the release of all captives and for the perpetrators to “disband.” In response to the declaration of the state of emergency, the army deployed two battalions to assist police in restoring law and order, but not within the parliament building, where the hostage-takers remained.

Shortly after that address, Speight also gave a press conference where he declared himself head of state and announced that decrees would be drafted to establish the “legal framework” for his government. He claimed to have the support of all Fijian political parties as well as the police and army. However media

reports described Speight as an “undischarged bankrupt and failed businessman,” who had appeared before the High Court four days earlier on charges of extortion. Meanwhile, Rabuka was reported to be attempting to broker a settlement, meeting with Speight, Ratu Mara, and the captive government. Speight described Rabuka as acting in his personal capacity and not as the chairman of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), which he claimed no longer existed. At the same time, Speight reiterated that he was acting on a mandate from the indigenous people that “went beyond legal technicalities.” He challenged overseas governments to recognize his legitimacy and he confidently predicted that his “interim government” would be up and running by Monday.

So ended one of the most bizarre and shocking days in Fiji’s modern history. It was also the beginning of a ten-day stand-off between the hostage-takers in parliament (soon to be labeled the George Speight Group) and the president. While the more militant nationalist leaders as well as some prominent chiefs aligned themselves with the Speight group, other Fijian politicians appeared to waver and wait on the sidelines. With Ratu Mara standing firm against the group, a propaganda campaign was launched by Speight supporters aimed at discrediting the president. Meanwhile out in the farmlands of Naitasiri and Tailevu, another campaign was conducted, aimed at terrorizing Indo-Fijian residents and driving them from their homes. In the western provinces of Vitilevu, Fijian opposition to the takeover led to threats of economic

sabotage but also to call for a separate western government. A meeting of the Great Council of Chiefs was convened to discuss the crisis and mobilize support for the president. But its deliberations were marred by deepening rivalries and divisions within the chiefly establishment. The resolution adopted at the end of three days was a vain attempt to give the Speight group most of what it wanted (pardon, interim government, review of the 1997 constitution) while retaining Ratu Mara as head of state. Not surprisingly the resolution was rejected by the Speight group, and Ratu Mara instead prorogued parliament and moved to set up an interim council of advisers with full executive powers.

With tensions deepening and ugly scenes of violence erupting around parliament and in downtown Suva, the army leadership made its move. A group led by Commander Frank Bainimarama met the president on the afternoon of 29 May and presented him with a traditional *isevusevu*, followed by a request that Ratu Mara “stand aside” and allow the military to assume control. This was reportedly in the interests of “national security” as well as to ensure the president’s safety. Later that night, Ratu Mara and some members of his family were spirited aboard a naval vessel that took them to Mara’s chiefly island of Lakeba. The army commander then declared martial law, a development broadly welcomed by the Fiji public as a last resort against anarchy and civil war.

Thus the first episode in Fiji’s political crisis ended, and another began. In what appeared to be an attempt to “neutralize” the demands of the Speight group, the first action of the

military was to issue a decree that abrogated the 1997 constitution. It also planned a decree granting amnesty to the Speight group once the hostages were released. An interim military government was set up, with Bainimarama as head of an executive council, initially planning to rule for six months then hand over to a civilian government. An impasse soon developed, however, over the Speight group’s demand that their Taukei Civilian Government be set up immediately with Bau High Chief Ratu Jope Seniloli as president. The army commander’s view was that none of the group had the credibility or the competence to be included in the civilian government. He also rejected their demand that the Great Council of Chiefs be reconvened to appoint a new president. “The military maintains its stance that we must secure the release of all hostages and return of all arms and other military stores before anything else is done. The GCC will be convened when we are assured of the peace and stability of the nation” (government press release, 4 June 2000).

Negotiations toward a “peaceful” end to the crisis dragged on through most of June and into July. During this time the government of Mahendra Chaudhry continued to be held hostage, while around them the grounds of parliament became the campsite (and at times fairground) for hundreds of Speight supporters. Many were from the villages of Tailevu (Speight’s province) and Naitasiri. The armed men who had originally stormed parliament were identified as soldiers from a special elite force known as the First Meridian Squadron and previously called the Counter

Revolutionary Warfare (CRW) Unit, set up by Rabuka after the coups of 1987 to deal with “terrorist” activities. They passed the time in parliament training “militia units” made up of young men and boys. While mostly confined to the grounds of parliament, the more unruly elements also engaged in criminal acts of arson, theft, and assault in the surrounding neighborhood, causing many residents to flee their homes. The army maintained a watchful, though mainly passive, role on the streets, except when provoked into occasional skirmishes with the “rebels.”

The stance adopted by the international community was one of cautious support for the efforts of the military to end the crisis, but at the same time unequivocal condemnation of the Speight group. Calls were made for a speedy return to democratic government, but trade and aid sanctions were not imposed as long as the hostage drama continued. At the end of June an agreement was reached between trade unions, employers, the military, and civil society groups to end union bans on Fiji. The crux of the agreement was that a constitutional resolution to the crisis should be pursued. Meanwhile an economic crisis was developing, with mounting job losses (many in the tourism sector), falling government revenue, and massive pay cuts. The Finance Ministry predicted that Fiji would experience negative 15 percent growth for the year, with a government deficit of 9 percent gross domestic product. (A 20 percent pay cut for civil servants was announced and later lowered to 12.5 percent).

In an effort to pressure the Speight group to end the occupation of parlia-

ment and release the hostages, the army commander on 4 July swore in an Interim Civilian Government, headed by former banker and Senator Laisenia Qarase. Comprising prominent Fijian technocrats and professionals, its task was to halt the slide in the economy as well as to address indigenous interests and concerns. The announcement of the interim government was described by Speight as “an affront to the objective of the coup and to the aspirations of the *vanua*,” and he dismissed the line-up as mainly “Mara’s men” (*Times*, 4 July 2000, 3). In the following days the crisis escalated. A group of Speight supporters seized control of the country’s main power station in central Vitilevu, shutting down power supplies to most of the island. In the northern town of Labasa, mutineers took control of the army barracks, backed by chiefs supporting Speight. The unrest spread to other parts of the country, with roadblocks erected, police stations occupied, and resorts and factories seized and shut down. At one major prison, inmates took wardens hostage, and a number also escaped.

To stem the rapidly deteriorating situation the military and the Speight group reached an agreement on the terms by which the hostages would be released and civilian government restored. Signed on the night of 9 July and known as the Muanikau Accord (after the neighborhood where most of the negotiations were held), it contained a number of concessions by the army. The most significant was an undertaking to hand over power by 13 July to a president and vice president to be appointed by the Great Council of Chiefs. This would pave

the way for the appointment of a new interim civilian government and the setting up of a constitution review process. While the Speight group undertook to release all hostages at the time of the GCC meeting, as well as to return all weapons to the army, the military promised to promulgate a decree granting immunity for all “political offences” committed between 19 May and 13 July. The two names that appeared to have the endorsement of both sides were Vice President Ratu Josefa Iloilo for president, and Ratu Jope Seniloli for vice president. George Speight was reported to be “ecstatic” over the outcome, describing it as a “great day for Fiji” (*Post*, 10 July 2000, 1).

On the evening of 13 July (and after the Great Council of Chiefs elected Ratu Josefa and Ratu Jope as president and vice president respectively), the hostages were finally released, ending fifty-six days in captivity. The *Fiji Times* editorialized, “The former People’s Coalition Government has returned to a country shaken and torn apart by events of recent months” (14 July 2000, 6). The international response was a mixture of relief that the hostages were free, and apprehension that Fiji was heading down an unconstitutional path. The end of the hostage drama did not bring any immediate relief to the country’s law-and-order problems, which seemed only to be worsening. With the swearing in of Ratu Josefa as president on 18 July, a tense standoff developed between the military and the Speight group over the position of prime minister and the composition of the interim government. This led to a delay in the announcement of

the cabinet line-up, with Ratu Iloilo abdicating any responsibility for the selection, leaving it to the military and the Speight group to finalize. The military’s preferred candidate for prime minister was Qarase, while that of the Speight group was Bau chief and Fiji’s High Commissioner to Malaysia Adi Samanunu Cakobau. (During this period Qarase and his team continued to govern in a caretaker capacity.)

The standoff ended dramatically on the night of 27 July, when Speight and some of his advisers were arrested at an army checkpoint, allegedly for violating the curfew and for illegally carrying arms. Early the next morning, the army stormed the school at Kalabu village, on the outskirts of Suva, where hundreds of Speight supporters had relocated after vacating the parliamentary compound. About three hundred people were arrested, including a number of the elite CRW soldiers who had taken part in the coup attempt. On 28 July, several other Speight supporters were arrested, including Timoci Silatolu, and on 29 July the core members of the group were transported to the nearby island of Nukulau, declared a prison zone by the military. It was reported that treason charges against the detainees would be investigated, with the military claiming that Ratu Iloilo’s life had been threatened (*Post*, 28 July 2000, 1). The army also claimed that since the terms of the Muanikau Accord had not been fulfilled (namely return of all weapons by the Speight group), immunity did not apply.

With the arrest of the group, a new episode in the crisis began. On 28 July the second interim administration was

sworn in, made up of 20 ministers and 8 assistant ministers. Laisenia Qarase retained his position as prime minister, and 13 members of his original cabinet were also returned. Among the new faces were SVT leader Kubua-bola, Taukei Movement leader Tora, and FAP faction leader Tu'akitau, politicians who had publicly supported the "indigenous cause" of the Speight group, if not its "method." The "vigorous pursuit of indigenous Fijian concerns" was made the central objective of the Qarase administration, with policies to meet that goal outlined in a *Blueprint for the Protection of Fijian and Rotuman Rights*, initially unveiled on 13 July. It covered the drafting of a new constitution, land and resource issues (including abolishing ALTA), measures to strengthen Fijian participation in commerce, review of the Fijian Administration and the Great Council of Chiefs, and affirmative action for Fijians and Rotumans. The blueprint's adoption led many observers to conclude that the objectives of the Speight group had been realized.

In responding to the appointment of the new administration, Labor Party spokesman and deposed foreign minister Tupeni Baba, said it was unfortunate the president's advisers had not considered a government of national unity. "The composition of the (interim) government is discriminatory and an open invitation for further sanctions . . . The government of national unity as provided for in the 1997 constitution offers Fiji a legitimate solution to the crisis" (*Times*, 29 July 2000, 2). Qarase, however, had firmly turned his back on any "constitutional" approach, asserting that the

reinstatement of the 1997 constitution was "not realistic." In order to have "enduring peace and stability" in Fiji, it was necessary to "look deeper into the root causes of widespread Fijian disaffection." This required the preparation of a new constitution to address issues of importance to Fijians and Rotumans, including their "collective desire" that the positions of head of state and head of government always be held by them (*Review*, Aug 2000, 26-29).

The administration's "road map" for the return to constitutional government was to promulgate a new constitution by August 2001 and to hold elections a year later (by September 2002). However, Qarase was unsuccessful in selling this plan to foreign governments. A meeting of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, which closely monitored developments in Fiji, described the timetable as "inadequate in terms of the need to promote reconciliation and unity in Fiji" and reaffirmed its support for the 1997 constitution (*Times*, 19 Sept 2000, 5). The European Union also declared its dissatisfaction with the situation and stated that it retained the right "to use any action or measure in response to violations of democracy" (*PNB*, Nov 2000, 13). The appointment of a constitution review committee in October did little to reassure or allay concerns. Its chairman, Professor Asesela Ravuvu, made clear his position that "western concepts of democracy and human rights" were a threat to indigenous values and institutions and should be rejected. Not surprisingly the committee's public hearings, which began in November, were largely boy-

cotted by Indo-Fijians, as well as by most mainstream political groups and leaders.

While the Qarase administration drew its legitimacy from the upsurge of indigenous Fijian nationalism generated by the events of 19 May, it also sought to silence the most public protagonists of that uprising—the Speight group. Part of its strategy for national reconciliation and international rehabilitation depended on a full investigation into, and the prosecution of, those responsible for the coup attempt. But this required a delicate balancing act between bringing the guilty to justice and not alienating too many of the administration's supporters. A number of prominent people clearly owed their positions of power to the events of 19 May, and some were also under a cloud of suspicion for their alleged involvement. They included the vice president, several ministers in the Interim Government, some members of the constitution review team and the police commissioner. Investigating, let alone charging such individuals, would prove a highly sensitive, if not impossible, undertaking.

On 16 August, Speight and sixteen others were charged in the Magistrate's Court with treason and various related offenses. Over the next few weeks more "rebels" were charged with treason. Complicating the prosecution case, however, was the status of the immunity decree promulgated soon after the release of the hostages. The Magistrate's Court had earlier acquitted a Speight supporter for attempted murder on the grounds that he was covered by the immunity decree. This acquittal was subse-

quently overturned by the High Court, after it ruled that the decree was invalid. By year's end the issue remained unresolved, with a final decision pending in the Court of Appeal. Aside from the issue of immunity, prosecution efforts were also hampered by the inability of the office of the director of public prosecution to gather sufficient evidence against some of the accused to bring them to trial. On 11 October, nine CRW soldiers were discharged by the Magistrate's Court, after charges of treason against them were dropped. This was followed by the dismissal on 6 December of treason charges against four key members of the Speight group held on Nukulau.

The failure to prosecute certain individuals, despite what appeared to be very clear and public acts of intent to depose the People's Coalition Government, drew wide criticism and concern. Questions were raised about the integrity and competence of the prosecutor's office, about apparent inconsistencies in the application of the law, but most of all about the likely consequences for the country if the remaining members of the Speight group were to be released, including Speight himself. The court proceedings proved to be a double-edged sword for the interim administration, exposing its highly tenuous legal and political position, while seeking to contain the dangerous instability that still remained.

Just how dangerous this situation was became tragically apparent soon after the release of the nine soldiers in mid-October. In what was described as an act of compassion and mercy, the nine were accepted back by the

military and allowed to resume duties under close supervision. It was not long before some of these same soldiers allegedly joined forces with other members of the First Meridian Squadron (more often referred to as the CRW unit) in an attempt to overthrow the military commander. The plot, which reportedly involved a number of prominent chiefs, ultimately aimed to replace the Qarase administration with one more sympathetic to, if not including, the Speight group. A variety of motives for the mutiny were later reported: to thwart investigations into the events of 19 May, to avenge the perceived mistreatment of CRW soldiers and civilians by the army after the storming of the Kalabu village school, and to stop the rumored disbanding of the CRW unit.

The mutiny began at lunchtime on 2 November at the main barracks of the Fiji army outside Suva. A group of about forty soldiers (led by some officers) opened fire on the commander's office, taking control of the armory, the national command center, and the officers' mess, and holding a number of hostages. Public reaction was at first muted, as many assumed a minor internal fracas. But as casualties mounted, with Suva's main hospital having to cope with an unprecedented number of emergencies, the seriousness of the situation became apparent. The mutiny was probably doomed early on, when the commander managed to escape the barracks and assume control from the relative safety of a suburban army base. But the rebel soldiers continued to hold out well into the evening. It was later reported that a mass of civilian supporters were waiting at nearly Kalabu

village, to be bussed into the barracks, where they would provide a human shield in a re-run of the parliamentary takeover. However, the army sealed off access to the barracks, preventing the villagers from carrying out this plan. As evening fell, the largest unit in the army (the Third Battalion Fiji Infantry Regiment), which had been away on a training exercise at the time of the mutiny, together with the navy and other military contingents, mounted an assault on the barracks. They succeeded in taking back control of all installations and capturing a number of the mutineers. About twenty escaped, later to be captured or to surrender. The death toll was eight soldiers (three "loyalists" and five "rebels"). Over thirty people, including some civilians caught in crossfire, were injured.

The brutal killing of the three "loyal" soldiers (one shot dead while he slept, another while he worked at his desk), and the ferocious retaliation of the army against the mutineers, left the people of Fiji shocked and shaken. The mutiny showed how far the country's "civility" had been eroded and how close to the point of disintegration it had come. Apart from the obvious issues it raised—How could this have been prevented? What was Rabuka doing in the barracks at the height of the fighting? Who, apart from the rebel soldiers, was involved?—the mutiny confronted the country with some bigger questions. What was the answer to Fiji's steadily worsening economic and political problems? How could meaningful reconciliation and recovery be achieved? And did the interim government have a future? On the last question, many observers

had begun to doubt that it did, given its perceived failure to provide effective leadership and a clear sense of direction.

The Fiji High Court provided the interim government with perhaps its greatest challenge. In what would prove a defining moment for the country, High Court Justice Anthony Gates handed down a ruling on 15 November that declared the 1997 constitution extant, the parliament elected in 1999 intact, and Qarase's interim government without any "constitutional foundation of legality." He called for Ratu Mara (whom he declared still the president since there was "no evidence" that he had resigned) to reconvene parliament and appoint a prime minister who could command the confidence of the House, and suggested that a constitutionally based government of national unity be set up (*Times*, 16 Nov 2000, 7).

The reaction to this ruling was perhaps predictable. While it was warmly welcomed by members of the deposed government, their supporters, civil society groups, the legal fraternity, and foreign governments, it was received with hostility and skepticism by many others. The interim administration rejected the ruling entirely and vowed to take the case to the Court of Appeal (claiming that proper procedures were not followed and it had been prevented from putting its evidence before the court). But the administration also appeared to dismiss the relevance of the court's ruling, with Qarase claiming that his government drew its authority from its appointment by the president, who in turn was mandated by the Great Council of Chiefs, which in turn was acting in accordance with the author-

ity vested in it by the 1874 Deed of Cession.

Meetings of Fijian leaders, held to discuss the Gates ruling, created a new wave of instability and uncertainty. As the year ended, there were warnings of renewed violence should the Gates ruling be enforced, with many suggesting that political solutions come before legal solutions. Said one chief, "Do the judges want turmoil to continue in the country? The law is one thing but reality is another" (*Times*, 2 Dec 2000, 3). These meetings prompted the army to warn, in turn, against agitation and rumor mongering. The army's position, in the wake of the mutiny, was clearly to prevent any upsurge in civil unrest and threats to national security. But it faced a growing dilemma. While pledging loyalty to the president it had installed, Ratu Iloilo, and support for the interim government, the army also recognized the likely national and international repercussions of ignoring the court's ruling. Foreign governments, the union movement, and human rights organizations vowed swift retaliation should Fiji not return to a legal and democratic system of government.

The dawn of the new millennium saw the country poised precariously between disaster and salvation. The events of 2000 could not be undone, nor could the enormous price paid by the people and the economy be compensated. Yet it remained to be seen whether Fiji's leaders, particularly the interim government, the Great Council of Chiefs, and the army, had the vision and courage to put Fiji on the path to long-term recovery. A lasting solution would only be realized when all political leaders, and all the differ-

ent communities, were involved in a process of dialogue and reconciliation. This should include a full and honest debate about the reasons behind the coup attempt. But too many Fijian leaders had yet to embrace this notion, committed instead to racist prescriptions and policies that denied any voice to the country's other communities and ethnic groups. As it greeted the new year, what Fiji desperately needed was a chance to redeem its future, a future that continued to be held hostage—like the People's Coalition Government had been—by the greed and folly of an influential few.

SANDRA TARTE

References

- PNB, Pacific News Bulletin.* Monthly. Suva.
Post, The Daily Post. Daily. Suva.
The Review. Monthly. Suva.
Sun, The Fiji Sun. Daily. Suva.
Times, The Fiji Times. Daily. Suva.

NEW CALEDONIA

Year two of the Noumea Accord (Chappell 1999) saw continuing movement toward self-government but also ongoing tensions in the fragile consensus that produced the fifteen-to-twenty-year agreement in 1998. In a May issue of *l'Express* a scathing article entitled, "The Discords of Noumea" (Conan 2000), highlighted contradictory interpretations by the signatories of what the accord meant, a lack of collegiality in the territorial congress, growing disunity among Kanak politicians, disputes over the provincial shares of a partial localiza-

tion of the *Société le Nickel* (SLN), and arguments over the role of indigenous Kanak custom in forming a common nationhood among diverse, often polarized, ethnic groups. It was a year filled with discord, but in October the country tried to put on a hopeful face by hosting the eighth Festival of Pacific Arts, a regional honor that its political strife had canceled fifteen years earlier.

Having experienced tragic intercommunal bloodshed in the 1980s, New Caledonian leaders voiced no support for the actions of extremists in neighboring Fiji in May 2000. Rock Wamytan, president of the *Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste* (FLNKS) condemned the Fijian coup attempt by George Speight: "The nationalist claims of Melanesians must be taken into account, but in a democratic framework." Wamytan blamed Britain for the ethnic crisis in Fiji, but he also recommended that Indo-Fijians take steps to share economic power with native Fijians (NC, 25 May 2000). Likewise, Leopold Jorédié, Kanak vice-president of the New Caledonian executive council, said his government "will not support a coup. To us, it is obvious that any government must come out of the will of the people" (PIR 25 May 2000). Aloisio Sako, president of the Wallisian *Rassemblement Démocratique Océanien* (RDO), called the Fijian coup a dangerous case of misdirected ethnic antagonism that trampled on fundamental human rights (Sako 2000).

The issue of "collegiality" in the congress had come up soon after the 1999 elections, when millionaire Jacques Lafleur's loyalist *Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République* (RPCR) gained a narrow