

‘Anxiety, Uncertainty, and Fear in Our Land’¹:

Fiji’s Road to Military Coup, 2006

Brij V Lal

‘[I]f civilization is to survive, one is driven to radical views. I do not mean driven to violence. Violence always compromises or ruins the cause it means to serve: it produces as much wrong as it tries to remedy. The State, for example, is always with us. Overthrow it and it will come back in another form, quite possibly worse. It’s a necessary evil – a monster that continually has to be tamed, so that it serves us rather than devours us. We can’t do without it, neither can we ever trust it.’²

Fiji experienced the whole gamut of emotions over the course of a fateful 2006.³ The year ended on the unsettled note on which it had begun. Fiji was yet again caught in a political quagmire of its own making, hobbled by manufactured tensions, refusing to heed the lessons of its recent tumultuous past, and reeling from the effects of the military coup of 5 December, Fiji’s fourth since its first on 14 May 1987. Ironies abound. A Fijian army confronted a Fijian government, fuelling the indigenous community’s worst fears about a Fijian army spilling Fijian blood on Fijian soil. The military overthrow took place exactly nineteen years to the day when frustrated coup maker of 1987, Sitiveni Rabuka, had handed power back to Fiji’s civilian leaders, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, paving the way for the eventual return of parliamentary democracy.

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¹ These words are from Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase’s ‘Address to the Nation/Comments at Press Conference,’ 1 Nov. 2006. Copy of the speech is widely available on numerous websites.

² Ian Milner, ‘A Conversation with Charles Brash,’ *Landfall: A New Zealand Quarterly*, 100 (1971), 344-72, at 349.

³ I am very grateful to Doug Munro, Hank Nelson, Vicki Luker, Stewart Firth and Ashwin Raj for their stringent and astute comments on a draft of this paper. But they are not responsible for its contents; I am.

This coup, like the previous ones, deposed a democratically elected government. Perhaps more importantly, it peremptorily sidelined the once powerful cultural and social institutions of the indigenous community, notably the Methodist Church and the Great Council of Chiefs, severing with a startling abruptness the overarching influence they had exercised in national life. Politicians who had supported past military coups in Fiji transformed themselves overnight into fearless defenders of democracy because this time they found themselves on the other side of the barrel of a gun.

On the other hand, some victims of previous coups, such as Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhry, accepted ministerial portfolios in a military-appointed interim administration on the grounds of serving the national interest: victim of coup one day, beneficiary the next. The Great Council of Chiefs⁴ initially opposed the coup but then in early January, backed Commodore Bainimarama and pledged ‘to work together [with the military] for the betterment of the nation.’⁵ In a similar fashion, the powerful Methodist Church, to which the overwhelming majority of indigenous Fijians belongs, reversed its initial opposition and endorsed the coup as a part of God’s plan for Fiji.⁶ To complete the chaotic saga of limited transition to quasi- civilian rule, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, initially disavowing a political role, accepted appointment as interim prime minister while remaining military commander, with the full support of a visibly ailing and curiously ineffectual President, Ratu Josefa Iloilo.

In between the talks of coup and confrontation, Fiji had its share of high drama caused by an intense election campaign in May and the installation soon thereafter of a multi-party power-sharing cabinet that promised, despite the initial teething problems, to take the country towards a new era of genuine multi-ethnic co-operation that its people so desperately want but which has remained elusive. But the military coup put paid to all that. This article traces the political roots and routes of Fiji’s latest constitutional crisis.

⁴ An entirely indigenous Fijian body traditionally of hereditary chiefs whose role has been to advise governments on matters pertaining to the Fijians. It appoints the President as well as the Vice President as well as 14 of the 32 members of the Senate (Upper House).

⁵ *Fiji Times* 14 Jan, 2007.

⁶ God’s name, it has to be said, was invoked by virtually every major player on all sides in the crisis.

The flashpoint between the military and the government in January 2006 came at the end of a long and troubled relationship. A ‘cold’ war between the two had begun as early as 2003 when it became clear that Commodore Frank Bainimarama was a ‘no-nonsense personality’ who would not toe the government line.⁷ An early indication came in 2004 when he single-handedly took on both the President and the Prime Minister and reversed a government order to reduce the sentence for soldiers involved in a mutiny in November 2000. In May of that year, five senior military officers alleged that Bainimarama was plotting to overthrow the government.⁸

In retaliation, the government quietly initiated moves to have the Commodore replaced. These were unsuccessful and relations between the two deteriorated rapidly. People close to the government, some even part of it, who were variously implicated in the attempted coup of 2000⁹ were released from jail after a brief period (some for as little as under a fortnight) under the Compulsory Supervision Order, and others on dubious medical grounds. Among them were the former Vice President, Ratu Joape Seniloli, and Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, the paramount chief of Cakaudrove (Tui Cakau), leader of Qarase’s Soqosoqo Duavata Lewenivanua (SDL) coalition partner, the Christian Alliance Matanivanua Party, and Minister for Fijian Affairs. The military insisted that the ‘real’ players in the 2000 crisis were walking free while the ‘small fry’ were being caught in the net. Others implicated were safely out of the country on plum diplomatic postings, such as Ratu Inoke Kubuabola posted to Malaysia as Fiji’s High Commissioner (now to Tokyo)¹⁰, and Isikia Savua, the controversial Police Commissioner in 2000¹¹, who was cleared of misconduct and dereliction of duty in a closed trial headed by the former Chief Justice (Sir Timoci Tuivaga¹²), and who later served in New York as Fiji’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

⁷ See *The Review Magazine* 15 July 2003, which described him thus: ‘Although he shuns the limelight, Bainimarama can come out firing if he believes he is being underestimated or unappreciated. He is said to be ‘silent thinker’ who thinks long-term. To his credit Bainimarama always seeks the advice of his officers –and also taps on the experience of those who have held office before him. He is definitely not a Yes-Man.’

⁸ *The Review Magazine*, 1 June, 2004. The allegation proved in the end to be true.

⁹ Brij V Lal, *Islands of Turmoil: elections and politics in Fiji* (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2006), pp. 185-231; and my ‘Fiji’s Constitutional Conundrum’, *The Round Table* (Oct 2003), 372 (671-685).

¹⁰ He was a self-acknowledged key player in the 1987 coup and a silent supporter of the one in 2000.

¹¹ Who watched while Suva was looted and burned by Speight-supporting mobs.

¹² Who had also drafted a decree abrogating the constitution soon after George Speight’s coup in 2000.

Having installed him as the Interim Prime Minister after the Speight crisis of 2000, hoping that Qarase would form a lean and corruption-free government, Bainimarama expressed disappointment that ‘politics as usual’ had prevailed. Qarase, a commerce graduate, had been the head of Fiji’s Development Bank for fifteen years (1983-1998) before heading the Fiji Merchant Bank. His headship of the FDB had been controversial, as he was accused of authorizing doubtful loans for racially-skewed projects. ‘He betrayed our trust when he went back to team up with the very people who caused the political instability of 2000,’ said Bainimarama. ‘Though George Speight is in prison, the policies that he made are now being adopted by the Government and also the very people behind him are in parliament making decisions for the nation.’¹³

Revelations of massive scam in the Ministry of Agriculture involving millions of dollars to purchase votes in the 2001 general election under the guise of pro-Fijian affirmative action policies, hardened his opposition against the government. Bainimarama fingered Attorney General Qoriniasi Bale for particular criticism. ‘He was not voted in by the people but [came in] through the Senate’. He raised questions about Bale’s competence and integrity. ‘We know Qoriniasi Bale’s record and involvement in some trust funds a few years back that saw him being disbarred for sometime.’ His appointment as Attorney General was ‘frightening.’ ‘Corruptive practices’ had to end, Bainimarama said in his quiet, determined way, and the sooner the better.¹⁴

Qarase defended his government. ‘The Commander makes many untruthful allegations against the Government,’ he said. ‘He regularly expresses unsubstantiated accusations about widespread corruption. My position is very clear. The Government has taken a very strong position against corruption. Draft legislation to combat this is being prepared. In the meantime, law enforcement authorities must be allowed to do their duty when allegations are made. Those making the allegations against the Government must provide evidence to the Police.’¹⁵ In this war of words, public sympathy seemed to lie with the Commodore, for ‘evidence’ of corruption (or mere incompetence and sheer carelessness)

¹³ Interview, *Fiji Sun*, 1 Nov 2006. It is not strictly true that Speight actually ‘made’ any policies although he did advocate hard line pro-Fijian sentiments many of which were appropriated by the government.

¹⁴ *Fiji Sun*, 1 Nov 2006

¹⁵ Form ‘Address to the Nation,’ 1 Nov 2006.

was everywhere, though prosecutions were difficult to initiate. Entrenched positions publicly aired in acrimonious tones made compromise and genuine dialogue difficult.

The military's condemnation of the government crystallized around two controversial bills the government sought to bring before parliament.¹⁶ One was the *Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill*. The government argued that the Bill was intended to heal the wounds of the past resulting from the events of 2000. The principle underlying the Bill was restorative, not retributive, justice. Its aim was to promote 'tolerance and genuine unity' among the people to prevent 'the perpetration of politically-motivated violations of human rights in Fiji.' Those who had suffered 'gross violations of human rights and civil dignity' would receive reparations. But the provision that inflamed not only the military's but civil society's vehement opposition to the Bill concerned the 'granting [of] amnesty to persons who make full disclosures of all facts relevant to acts associated with a political, as opposed to purely criminal, objective during the crisis.'

Rightly or wrongly, the amnesty provision came to be viewed as a device to pardon the coup perpetrators. The hasty release from jail of those convicted of various coup-related crimes increased the public's suspicion about the government's real, unstated, intentions. It was also argued that the Bill's amnesty provision was in fact intended to circumvent the country's generally robust judiciary whose proper role it was to adjudicate matters of such importance. How could there be reconciliation without justice, many asked?

Faced with sustained vocal pressure from a wide cross-section of the community, the government withdrew the Bill, promising to take account of the concerns that had been raised. Ultimately, yielding to pressure, the government decided 'categorically,' to use Qarase's words, to drop the amnesty provision. By dropping the provision after months of insisting that it would not be removed or amended under any circumstances, Qarase caught the nation by surprise and briefly reclaimed some of the ground he had lost to Commodore Bainimarama. The concession was an act of political expediency, not an act

¹⁶ All Bills presented to the Fiji Parliament are available on the internet and on the website of the Fiji dailies. The third Bill, the Indigenous Land Tribunal Bill, was also on the military's list but did not get much airing.

of genuine compromise. Expedient or genuine, the concession came too late. By then, the military had already decided to overthrow the government.

But the question was asked: if the much-criticized amnesty provision was dropped, what remained of Bainimarama's objection? Self preservation was said to be the answer. If the Reconciliation Commission, which the Bill proposed to set up, was established, the Commodore's violent suppression of an Army mutiny in November 2000 which nearly claimed his life and which resulted in the brutal death of rebel soldiers would be scrutinized. Many in Fiji believe that Bainimarama is 'haunted' by the mutiny – indiscipline and insubordination in the ranks of the military, its violent quelling, the attempt on the Commodore's life -- and read his subsequent behavior in the light of that fact. Questions would also be asked about the Commodore's role, as then head of the Military Government, in the dismissal of the President, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara in 2000. To his detractors, the Commodore's public pronouncements on the Bill were suspect, carefully camouflaging personal interests behind the publicly appealing rhetoric of guarding the national interest.

The other piece of legislation that the military opposed (as did the opposition parties and commercial organizations such as the Fiji Hoteliers Association) was the *Qoliqoli Bill* (2005) designed to transfer 'all proprietary rights to and interests in qoliqoli [foreshore] areas within Fiji fisheries waters [and] vest them in the *qoliqoli* owners.' By this process, the marine area from the foreshore to the high water mark would be declared 'native reserves,' for the unfettered use and enjoyment of the resource owners. The tourism industry reacted predictably with outrage, prophesizing its collapse because of the uncertainty that the Bill would introduce into the negotiations between the hotel owners and the numerous qoliqoli owners. Others argued that the state was hastily divesting itself of a major resource which it should develop for the benefit of the entire nation, including the resource owners. 'Thousands upon thousands of vacant and re-possessioned land are not being used, making Fiji the world's largest producer of weeds and grass,' remarked Deputy Opposition Leader Bernadette Rounds.¹⁷

¹⁷ Radio New Zealand International 21 Nov 2006.

Many *qoliqoli* boundaries are uncharted or unregistered and the critics, including the military, felt that the Bill would accentuate conflict among Fijians when registration started. But the government, which went to the elections promising to introduce the Bill in parliament if it was returned to power, claimed that it had majority Fijian support for the Bill. After all, over 80 per cent of indigenous Fijians had voted for the SDL. The real implications of the Bill were not properly explained to the Fijians, the military counteracted. The Fiji Law Society entered the debate, pointing out that the Qoliqoli Bill breached certain provisions of the Constitution. ‘By transferring to the landowners qoliqoli areas as defined in the Bill,’ the Society’s *qoliqoll* sub-committee chair Isireli Fa stated, ‘the state is in fact transferring to them the state’s rights of sovereignty within these qoliqoli areas. The effect of this is that the *qoliqoli* could become autonomous areas whereby the owners of the qoliqoli could implement their own rules outside the regulation and control of the State.’

The upshot of the public debate on these two controversial bills was to secure wide opposition support for Commodore Bainimarama who was perceived as an honest man taking on a corrupt and self-serving government playing to the basest sentiments of people in a blatant effort to remain in power. The Commodore’s strictures became harsher, less compromising. Early in 2006, relations between the government and the military reached breaking point. The army staged a show of strength on the day parliament was dissolved in March, with five hundred soldiers in full battle gear marching through the streets of Suva. The army’s point was blunt: those who contemplated orchestrating violence to oppose a change of government, would bear the full brunt of its force.

In fact, Bainimarama said publicly a few months before the election that a change of government would be good for Fiji. In the public eye, he was aligned with the opposition parties. As the campaign began in early 2006, the army sent teams of officers to Fijian villages to ‘educate’ the people about what it deemed to be the ‘real’ intentions behind the government’s legislative agenda – to secure Fijian votes by plundering the public purse. A nebulous truce between the army and the government was negotiated by Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi in mid-January 2006 according to which both men

agreed to put ‘the national interest’ above everything else and to have regular consultation and dialogue, but the impression remained of simmering tension. A few months later the deal collapsed. ‘Qarase is trying to weaken the army by trying to remove me,’ Bainimarama said. ‘It has been his aim from day one. If he succeeds there will be no one to monitor them, and imagine how corrupt it is going to be. If civil servants speak out against the Government, they are sacked. If the provincial councils speak, their allocated funds are reduced, so we are the only hope of the silent majority.’¹⁸ The army’s claim that it, not the government, was the true champion of the public interest would be trumpeted loudly in the months ahead.

For its part, the government insisted that the army was simply an ‘instrument of the state,’ not an institution outside or above it.¹⁹ ‘The constitutional and statutory authority of the RFMF [Republic of the Fiji Islands Military Force] is strictly confined to maintaining and safeguarding national security within a democracy’. The military’s contention that the overarching security role it was given in the 1990 constitution carried over into the 1997 constitution was incorrect, Qarase argued and he sought the intervention of the Supreme Court to clarify the issue. Section 94 of the 1990 constitution gave the military the overall responsibility to ensure the security, defense and well being of Fiji and its people at all times, and the army claimed that the section was incorporated into Section 112 (1) of the 1997 constitution. The government argued that Section 94 had been repealed in its entirety. Section 112 (1) simply reads: ‘The military force called the Republic of Fiji Military Forces established by the Constitution of 1990 continues in existence.’²⁰

Qarase alleged further that Bainimarama had breached the understanding brokered by Vice President Madraiwiwi on 16 January, 2006. Under that agreement, Bainimarama ‘would not make public statements without clearing them first with the Prime Minister.’ He said, ‘I met with the Commander under these arrangements. The problem that

¹⁸ See *Fiji Sun* 1 Nov 2006.

¹⁹ Address by Laisenia Qarase to the Great Council of Chiefs, 9 Nov 2006.

²⁰ The Fiji Human Rights Commission, in a 32 page report, released in early January 2007 generally endorses the military line. It is also highly (hyper) critical of the policies and practices of the Qarase government.

immediately arose was he expected me to virtually follow his orders.’ Finally, Qarase claimed that the military was ‘being used or influenced by unscrupulous people opposed to certain items of legislation introduced by the Government,’ and suggested that the Commodore was ‘being manipulated by those with a certain political agenda.’²¹ There is no doubt that Qarase had in mind the tourism industry which was vehemently opposed to the *Qoliqoli* Bill.

The tension between the military and the government went underground from March to May (2006) as Fiji held its tenth general election since independence in 1970.²² After several weeks of generally amiable campaigning, but with the usual allegation of vote rigging and electoral malpractices – which international observer teams deemed far-fetched²³ – Qarase’s SDL party was returned to power with 36 of the 71 seats in the House of Representatives. The Fiji Labour Party won 31 seats, the United Peoples’ Party and Independents two each. Minor parties and disgruntled independents who had briefly threatened to upset the conventional wisdom about the dominance of the two main parties, vanished without a trace. The SDL was clearly the party of choice among Fijians, winning over 80 per cent of the Fijian communal votes, compared to 51 per cent in 2001. Qarase’s assiduous courting of the Fijian voters through special assistance programs and grants for the indigenous community and open appeal to Fijian nationalism had paid good dividends. The overwhelming majority of the Indo-Fijian voters – 83 per cent – rallied behind Labour, leaving its main rival among Indo-Fijians, the National Federation Party, the main opposition party up to that point, grasping for political breath.

A narrow but clear victory for the SDL led the country to breathe a sigh of relief. Although it was impolitic to say so at the time of the campaign, the silent though widespread feeling in the country was that there would have been rumbling in the

²¹ Address to the Nation, 1 Nov 2006.

²² My book, *Islands of Turmoil: Elections and Politics in Fiji* (Canberra: Asia Pacific Books, 2006), covers this subject. The 2006 election is discussed at pp. 251-264. Another piece ‘Chance Hai: Impressions from the Campaign Trail’ will appear in *Polarisation and Power-Sharing in Fiji: The Paradox of the 2006 General Election* edited by Jonathan Fraenkal, Stewart Firth and Wendy Tubman (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 2007).

²³ Including the Commonwealth Secretariat and the South Pacific Forum in Suva. I should note that both the Human Rights Commission and the military allege that there were irregularities in the election process although no evidence has so far been produced before the courts.

countryside, perhaps something more, if Labour had won the election. Qarase played the race card effectively to rally the Fijians behind him. One of the central planks in the SDL campaign was that Fiji was not yet ready for a non-Fijian prime minister. Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhry became the targeted focus of Fijian animus. Qarase also said that he found the idea of compulsory power-sharing embedded in the multi-party cabinet idea ‘abhorrent’: multi-ethnic cabinet yes, multi-party cabinet no.²⁴

But as soon as the election results were known, Qarase did an astounding about-turn. Confident in the driver’s seat, he welcomed, to most peoples’ utter surprise, the concept of multi-party cabinet as the best way forward for Fiji. Indeed, he became its most vocal and enthusiastic proponent. Instead of offering Labour miniscule ministries of little electoral significance or fiscal viability, as he had done in 2001, he now offered substantial portfolios, including agriculture, trade and commerce, labour, industrial relations, urban development and health. Whether Qarase’s about-turn was a Machiavellian plot to co-opt and destroy Labour in a cabinet dominated by the SDL, or whether it was a genuine gesture of power-sharing, became a point of debate.

Qarase’s offer put Labour in a quandary. At first Labour leader Chaudhry protested that the ministries his party was offered were those ‘in a mess,’ only to be told by the electorate to join the government to help clean it up. Whatever calculations lay behind Qarase’s offer, the mood in the country was enthusiastically in favour of the power-sharing arrangement which the usually combative Labour leader could only ignore at his political peril. Chaudhry offered a list of Labour names to Qarase but insisted that he be allowed to allot the portfolios among his nominees. That, Qarase rightly argued, was the prerogative of the prime minister. Chaudhry then maneuvered to have himself appointed the Leader of the Opposition, clearly an absurd proposition given that nine of his members were in the cabinet. Moreover, his demand was in direct breach of the Korolevu Declaration he himself had signed in 1999: ‘Any party that participates in Cabinet is

²⁴ The 1997 constitution provides that any political party with more than ten per cent of seats in the House is constitutionally entitled to be invited to serve in cabinet.

deemed not to be in Opposition.²⁵ The President, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, rejected Chaudhry's offer, as he had to.

Labour insiders said that Chaudhry was personally not keen on the idea of any multi-party cabinet which he himself did not lead, and which he in any case thought would collapse under the weight of its own internal problems and contradictions.²⁶ Some of his Labour ministers, such as Krishna Datt and Poseci Bune, now in the twilight of their political careers, wanted the concept to succeed. They acknowledged the difficulties but promised to persist. Chaudhry demanded from his ministers a strict adherence to Labour policies as the basis for their participation in cabinet. That caught the Labour ministers between the proverbial rock and the hard place. They could not ignore the directive of the Labour parliamentary caucus, but they also had to acknowledge the prime minister as their leader of government.

The Labour party was split. When Datt questioned if Chaudhry's style was appropriate in the new environment attuned more to consensus and compromise rather than the confrontation characteristic of the Westminster system, and went on to praise Qarase's consultative style in contrast to his own leader's, the internal dissension became public. Chaudhry initiated disciplinary action against the dissidents. Subsequently, Datt and Bune were expelled for questioning the authority of their leader and for bringing the party 'into disrepute.' It must be said, parenthetically, that there cannot be too many parties in the post-Stalinist world which expel senior members for questioning their leader's political judgment or the way in which the party is run.

Several problems emerged only too clearly. One was absence of any ground rules for the operation of the multi-party cabinet, which created confusion about roles and responsibilities of the ministers from parties diametrically opposed to each other in their policies. Strangely, neither Qarase nor Chaudhry, both vying for political advantage over the other, saw the urgency of the matter. By the time the subject was resurrected for discussion, a coup was in train.

²⁵ Section 3 (b) of the Declaration, a copy of which was subsequently published as a Parliamentary Paper.

²⁶ This is based on conversations with some of the members of the Labour Party members in cabinet. But see also Maika Bolatiki, 'FLP crisis poses threat,' *Fiji Sun* 19 Sept 2006.

Another problem was Chaudhry's reluctance to be in the cabinet, which compounded the difficulties of his ministers. According to the Westminster convention, ministers were required to maintain cabinet solidarity and confidentiality of its proceedings. Chaudhry was the leader of the Labour party, but not privy to cabinet discussions, which accentuated his angst and frustration, which he then vented upon his dissenting ministers. He publicly criticized government policies which his own ministers had a hand in formulating, in effect playing the role of a de facto opposition leader, in which he thrived. In November, Qarase offered Chaudhry the portfolio of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. Chaudhry dithered, fearing co-option and marginalization. He now wanted multi-party cabinet ground rules to be finalized before he would consider the offer.

There had, however, been no such insistence when he nominated nine of his party members for cabinet. Many thought the working out of the multi-party cabinet was not Chaudhry's priority; disciplining dissidents in his party and asserting his iron-grip on the party machinery was. 'In a strange twist of destiny,' as he put it, he accepted the same portfolios from the military but not from a democratically elected government. Had Chaudhry been less tepid about the multi-party cabinet, and participated in it, Commodore Bainimarama might –just might—have considered the situation differently, deterred by a strong display of multi-ethnic unity on the political front between the leaders of the two main communities in Fiji.

Mahendra Chaudhry's personal reluctance to be in a multi-party cabinet was understandable, if only in narrow, self-serving political terms, but Qarase's behaviour made matters worse. Instead of adopting confidence-building measures with his Labour partner in government, he insisted on rushing through parliament the controversial bills relating to amnesty and foreshore. Their passage was important for him to consolidate his ethnic Fijian constituency, particularly the hard nationalist fringe which had given SDL its unequivocal support. It was good politics but bad policy. Second, Qarase appointed controversial people to key portfolios. Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, convicted for inciting mutiny in 2000, was appointed to the crucial Fijian Affairs ministry. His colleague, Ratu Josefa Dimuri, was appointed to the Senate. Josefa Vosanibola, the controversial Home

Affairs minister, was back in his old portfolio despite the military's strong objection to his appointment. The statutory boards were filled with pliant political appointees. Chanting the mantra of popular mandate (in much the same counterproductive way as Mahendra Chaudhry had done in 1999), the government gave the appearance of studied indifference to its critics.

Making matters worse for the government were revelations in the courts of massive vote-buying scams in the Agriculture ministry. Bainimarama accused the government of fostering dissent in the army. Land Forces Commander Jone Baleidrokadroka's challenge to Bainimarama in January 2006 was cited as one example of this. Baleidrokadroka was dismissed from the military and faced the charge of indiscipline and insubordination, but then it was discovered that he was short-listed for the post of Commissioner of Prisons. Was the 'revolving door' of the past at play again? people wondered. The sluggish growth of the economy, the allegation that the government was virtually bankrupt and living on borrowed money, compounded its problem and encouraged open questioning of the government's competence to run the country.

By early October 2006, the army's cup of disillusionment was full. Bainimarama asked the government to resign, giving it a three-week ultimatum, as he left on an inspection tour of Fijian soldiers serving in peace keeping missions in the Middle East. 'We don't need any special powers to legalize our move in demanding the government to resign,' the Commander said. 'And we don't have to take over because the military will walk into the office of the Prime Minister and demand his resignation. If the people want us to do this, we will. At this stage, Fiji needs good governance and the military will demand their resignation. There is nothing illegal about this.'²⁷ His uncompromising stance was hardening by the day. The government predictably protested its innocence and refused to resign.

For its part, the military, under Acting Commander Esala Teleni, reiterated its criticism. Its strident statements, backed by a publicly-expressed willingness to use force to remove the government, created high tension in the country and scared neighbours such as

²⁷ *Fiji Times* 17 Oct 2006.

Australia and New Zealand into backing Qarase, with Australia sending a couple of naval ships to evacuate its citizens in the event of an emergency. The entry into Fiji of Australian SAS personnel carrying arms and communication equipment without proper authorization or customs clearance in Fiji, increased talk of foreign invasion, with the government's tacit support. It was learnt later that Qarase had thrice unsuccessfully asked Australia and New Zealand for military assistance to confront the Fiji military. Fortunately for Fiji, the request was rejected. Taking on the highly trained and professional Fijian soldiers on Fijian soil would have resulted in bloodshed on an unprecedented scale.

The government made matters worse for itself by trying to remove Bainimarama while he was overseas and have him, again unsuccessfully, replaced by another senior officer, Colonel Ratu Meli Saubulinayau. This inept move strengthened the Commander's standing among his troops and in the country at large as a man proudly defending Fiji's national sovereignty. The National Alliance Party, headed by former military commander, Ratu Epli Ganilau, a high chief in his own right, condemned the government, calling its action to remove 'the military commander in absentia and without even informing him' alarming.²⁸ His sentiments were echoed widely. Bainimarama also feared that the Qarase government might implement the 2006 *Defense White Paper* which repeated the recommendations of the *Security and Defense Review* of 2004 that the size of the military forces be halved.²⁹

More alarming, on the local scene, was the deteriorating relationship between the military and the police force, with the Australian commissioner, Andrew Hughes, coming under strident attack for seemingly promoting the government's (and according to his critics Asustralia's regional) agenda. But there was another reason for the tension between the military and the police commissioner. Hughes was nearing the end of his investigation of

²⁸ *Fiji Times* 3 Nov 2006.

²⁹ The 2004 Review argued that the Republic of Fiji Military Forces was 'too top heavy and cumbersome for the size of the force and will need drastic revision once the options outlined above are decided. The rank structure is also grossly distorted, for example there are 80 warrant officers class 1 and 159 warrant officers Class II in a force that would justify no more than 10 and 30 respectively at that rank. The same applies for officers. There are 8 colonels and 23 lieutenant colonels when half that number would be excessive in the current force.' I am grateful to Professor Stewart Firth for this information.

the commander regarding his ‘treasonous’ statements about the government. Bainimarama had dubbed his campaign to get rid of the government as a ‘clean-up’ campaign, and Hughes said he wanted to ‘find out what it means in the context of my broader responsibility for maintaining law and order in Fiji.’³⁰ Allegations against Bainimarama included disobedience of law and order, seditious comments, unlawful removal of a container of ammunition from the wharf, alleged plotting to overthrow the government, unlawfully obtaining from the President an order to abort a commission of enquiry against himself and an investigation into the deaths of rebel soldiers in the November 2000 mutiny. Bainimarama dismissed Hughes’ accusations as not being ‘in the interest of crime prevention and investigation but to remove me from office as a result of political pressure on the Police Commissioner to silence the RFMF.’³¹

Hughes went further, appealing directly to the soldiers. ‘I repeat a warning made a few weeks ago to the military, officers and troops in the military that they cannot commit unlawful acts and say I was only following orders.’³² Five senior officers were already facing charges of committing unlawful acts. Most in the military were ‘decent, honest and law-abiding honorable professionals, who should not have their reputations tainted. ‘Think of your families and I don’t want to see costly mistakes happen.’ The military was being manipulated. ‘In 2000 there were people behind George Speight, shadowy, operating in the shadows, manipulating and influencing rebels and we suspect the same applies here. There are individuals, groups and organizations behind this inciting and manipulating the commander and others to do what they are doing. Tell everyone hiding in the shadows who were involved in the conspiracy to destabilize the Government that they need to think again because the investigation is getting closer.’ Hughes had a commendable record as police commissioner, the best in recent years, but his increasingly public outbursts about ‘shadowy characters’ and about the need for justice to prevail, his appeal to soldiers above the head of the commander, created the impression that he was doing the government’s bidding. The fraught relationship between the

³⁰ *Fiji Times Online* 25 Nov 2006.

³¹ *Fiji Sun*, 11 Nov 2006

³² *Fiji Times Online* 25 Nov 2006

military and the police force broke down completely. Bainimarama demanded Hughes's immediate resignation.

While tension mounted, Qarase turned to the Great Council of Chiefs to resolve the impasse, seeking its 'support and understanding of the approach I am taking to seek a resolution to this.' After describing the legislative processes of government, he outlined the importance to the Fijian people of the controversial Qoliqoli Bill and the Indigenous Claims Tribunal Bill.³³ These Bills, Qarase argued, were an integral part of the government's 'Blueprint for Fijian and Rotuman Development' – racially-based affirmative action policies in favour of the indigenous communities – which were endorsed both by Bainimarama and the interim cabinet on 11 July 2000. Qarase said 'it was wrong to ignore the pleas and oft-expressed wishes of the Fijians over these historical grievances,' adding that 'so long as the undercurrents of unhappiness and discontent associated with them continue, we can never be assured about long term stability in Fiji.'³⁴ Under the auspices of the Blueprint, the government had already transferred Crown Schedule A and B from the government to the Native Land Trust Board.³⁵ A Fijian Trust Fund had been established to give the Great Council of Chiefs an independent source of income. Qarase did not need to repeat other policies in education and in the transport industry (such as giving special grants to Fijian-run schools and denying them to Indo-Fijian schools where often the majority of the students were Fijians, and reserving fifty per cent of all new taxi licenses to Fijians). Seen in the broad context, all these measures were designed to ensure the 'paramountcy of Fijian interests.'

Was Qarase wise in seeking the support and intervention of the chiefs in resolving the impasse? The Great Council of Chiefs had often been called upon in the past (in 1987 and again in 2000) to adjudicate matters of national interest. At one level, Qarase argued, the crisis was between the government and an institution of the state. 'But when we look deeply into it,' he said, 'we see that this concerns the relationship between a Fijian-led

³³ This Bill's purpose is to enable Fijians to present cases concerning long standing grievances about the alienation of some of their ancestral land and seek compensation or return. Around 500 claims have been lodged thus far.

³⁴ Address to the Great Council of Chiefs.

³⁵ Land which is deemed vacant or without an owner as decided by the Native Land Commission set up after Cession in 1874.

government and a Fijian-led army. It is about us, *koi keda saka na I taukei kei Viti kei Rotuma* [indigenous people of Fiji and Rotuma].’ It was for this reason that he had sought the Council’s ‘blessings to the Commander and to me, as we find our way to the path of peace and reconciliation for all.’³⁶

Bainimarama differed. For him, the impasse was a political problem to be resolved by the government in consultation with the military. He accused Qarase of evading his responsibility as the duly elected leader of the government. Further, the Commander did not see the Council as a neutral or appropriate body to adjudicate the dispute. Many of its members had supported the coups of 1987 and 2000, and some of them occupied senior positions in government. Bainimarama: ‘I say Qarase lied from the beginning when he was elected to lead the country and did the opposite of what is expected of a Prime Minister in laughing at the rule of law by releasing coup perpetrators and coming up with racist policies that has [sic] divided this country more than ever.’³⁷

As for the Great Council of Chiefs itself, Bainimarama was adamant that the military would not listen to them and that it was ‘wrong for them to be involved in making any decisions.’ Bainimarama’s dismissive attitude towards the chiefs was unprecedented and could have had far reaching consequences. The *Fiji Sun* editorialized: ‘The chiefs have been treated with contempt. They have been reviled as never before by being told [by Bainimarama] to go and drink homebrew under a mango tree as they could be of no further use. Where it will all end is difficult to predict but it does seem inevitable that the GCC will emerge from whatever process takes place a diminished force at least in the public mind.’³⁸ Its quiet endorsement of the coup has compromised its position, especially as the coup was against a Fijian leader who was their staunch champion.

³⁶ See also Maika Bolataki, ‘Fijian State versus Fijian Army,’ *Fiji Sun* 11 Nov 2006

³⁷ *Fijilive* 12 Nov 2006.

³⁸ 15 Dec 2006. See also the editorial of 20 December where the paper asked: ‘Are we seeing the beginning of the end of a chiefly system unable to integrate with this rapidly evolving world in which we live? Probably not. But we may be witnessing the first signs of a society unsure of its changing relationship with its history as the outside world inexorably alters the way in which we see ourselves and our place in it.’ Further, ‘there is a strong case for arguing that the chiefs have diminished in status as a result of the GCC’s stand-off with the army commander and it is difficult to see how they can reverse that.’

How the GCC reacts as events unfold will be watched with considerable interest. The 1987 coup was staged in the name of the chiefs and conventional understandings of their place in the larger scheme of things; this coup is a complete reversal. In the longer perspective, the damage that the military has done to the role and function of traditional chiefs in modern society may come to be seen as a far more significant effect of the military coup than the damage it has done to the institutions of parliamentary democracy. The latter can be repaired, as Fiji's recent experience suggests. But the damage to the indigenous cultural and social institutions may be irreparable.

As the standoff between the military and the government escalated, the budget debate in parliament in November created further acrimony. Public attention and angst focused on the proposed increase in VAT (Value Added Tax) from 12.5 per cent to 15 per cent except on basic consumer items such as powdered milk, tea, flour, sharps, tinned fish and kerosene. The government argued that the tax was considered world-wide as 'increasingly important as a source of revenues,' and that it was 'one of the fairest and most efficient methods of taxation.'³⁹ One hundred and twenty countries had it, including many in the Pacific Islands. Labour rejected the tax outright and used the occasion to mount a spirited attack on the government's overall economic performance. Apart from causing internal dissension in the Labour Party when two of its ministers (Krishna Datt and Poseci Bune) decided to support the budget so as not to jeopardize the multi-party cabinet, it raised a huge public outcry. The government's credibility as the manager of the nation's economy was at its lowest ebb. Public sympathy amongst the nation's poor was shifting towards the military.

In early November, Bainimarama repeated his 'non-negotiable' demands for the police to drop all investigation against him, for all cabinet members who were involved in the 2000 coup and had served prison terms to be removed, for police commissioner Andrew Hughes to resign, for the police force's lightly-armed Tactical Response Unit to be disbanded and for the two controversial bills to be withdrawn. In late November, taking the opportunity of Bainimarama's private visit to New Zealand for a family celebration, New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark arranged a meeting between the commander

³⁹ Budget Speech, 22 Nov 2006.

and Qarase in an effort to break the impasse.⁴⁰ To the military's demand that the government publicly declare that the coup of 2000 was illegal and that all those associated with it had to be removed from office, Qarase agreed to 'develop, without delay, a renewed and fully resourced public education programme, to take to the public and the villages of Fiji, an information programme aimed at ensuring the wide public awareness and understanding that the events of 2000 were illegal.' Those found by due process to have associated themselves with illegal activities would be prosecuted.

On the controversial bills, Qarase agreed that if the bills were found to be 'legally or constitutionally unsound,' they would be suspended (the military wanted them dropped). On the investigations against Bainimarama, Qarase agreed that if the appropriate Fiji government authorities (Solicitor General, Director of Public Prosecutions and the Commissioner of Police) recommended that the charges be dropped, the government would heed their advice(the military wanted the charges dropped forthwith). Andrew Hughes' contract was up for renewal, and the government agreed to accept the military's concerns when reviewing his position (the military wanted immediate termination of his contract). There would be no foreign military or police intervention in Fiji's affairs. Qarase agreed to 'undertake a review of the Police Tactical Response Unit.' The military's concerns about corruption and good governance would be addressed through new legislation dealing with leadership conduct, freedom of information and through the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Agency. And finally, regarding the military's concerns about force structure, allowances and terms of reference and conditions of employment would be addressed by an independent committee.

Qarase had conceded to virtually all of Bainimarama's demands, going as far as he could, although his critics argued that the prime minister was merely buying time by attempting to give the impression that action would follow when he had no such intentions. In any event, he had acknowledged his weakness and starkly demonstrated the relative power of elected office versus the military. But the commander repudiated the 'deal' as soon as he returned to Fiji. His mind had already been made up long before his New Zealand visit. The 'clean-up' campaign was fully activated, although no one knew precisely what the

⁴⁰ *Fiji Daily Post*, 3 Dec 20026

military had in mind. Strategic facilities around the country were secured, police armmunitions seized, access to the President channeled through the military.

At six pm on 5 December, Commodore Bainimarama announced the military takeover: ‘We consider that Fiji has reached a crossroads and that the government and those empowered to make decisions in our constitutional democracy are unable to make these decisions to save our people from destruction.’ He misguidedly invoked the ‘doctrine of necessity’⁴¹ in defense of his action and declared a state of emergency. But no ‘exceptional circumstances’ existed in the country. The duly elected government was in office. The prime minister had not advised the President to dissolve parliament, and the executive in the Westminster system is obliged to act on the advice of the prime minister. Claiming that the President was being put under undue pressure and prevented from exercising his constitutional powers, Bainimarama assumed his executive powers. The constitution, the commander claimed, was still alive. His coup, therefore, was constitutional. In truth, it was anything but.

A state of confusion ensued about the fate of the constitution, the commander’s conduct under it, the meaning and implications of the doctrine of necessity, the impact of impending sanctions, but none was more confusing than the behaviour of the President. In his mid-80s, frail and reportedly suffering from Parkinson’s disease, he was conspicuous by his absence from the public eye. Conflicting statements issued under his name compounded the problem. It was claimed that the President had sanctioned Bainimarama’s action – the two were reportedly close – but then came the claim that the President was still incharge. The removal from office of the Vice President Madraiwiwi, a former high court judge, deprived the country of sane advice. Exactly a month after the coup, on 5 January 2007, Bainimarama re-installed the President whose powers he had temporarily appropriated. The President then appointed the interim administration, with the Commodore at its head.

⁴¹ The doctrine authorizes the executive to intervene if the government is unable to discharge its responsibilities in the event of an emergency such as massive civil disorder. But the doctrine is limited in its scope, and the executive is obliged to return power to the government once the emergency was over.

At the time of this writing, the confusion continues. The constitution has not been abrogated, at least formally, although the commander's edicts are in breach of its essential spirit. Many chief executive officers and political appointees of statutory bodies have been sacked. Senior military officers have been appointed to the police and prison services. Civil liberties remain precariously intact under the ever vigilant eye of the military, although abuse of human rights has begun to surface. Travel bans on those involved in the coup have been imposed by Australia, New Zealand and the European Union, and sanctions and cancellation of defense and sporting have been enforced. The Commonwealth has suspended Fiji's membership from its Foreign Ministers meeting. The economy will suffer from a decline in the tourist sector and the country's sugar industry, already under considerable strain from the projected cessation of preferential access to the European Union, will continue to deteriorate. The concurrent announcement by Emperor Gold Mines that it would be ceasing its operations, with a loss of 1,500 local jobs, will have its effect. And the emigration of the best and the brightest, already high, will continue apace, draining the country of talent and skill it can ill afford to lose. All this is predictable.

But some things are not. On the political front, the fraught relationship between the army and the Great Council of Chiefs is not something that would have been predicted even six months before. In the past, the GCC, as the umbrella body of the Fijians, exercised great moral and legal authority over the affairs of the indigenous community. It had endorsed the coups of 1987 and, less overtly, in 2000. Now, fractured and hobbled and ineffectively-led, it is a frustrated bystander in a saga involving the Fijians. Fijians are divided, and the GCC is unable to provide its accustomed leadership. Already, there is grumbling in the *vanua*, the land, about the military and its dismissive attitude to the chiefly body. Some provinces have asked their sons and daughters in the army to return home. It is unlikely that they will; for them, the military is their *vanua*, which has given them a place in society and is the source of their livelihood.

The potential for fragmentation and division in the indigenous community, along provincial and regional lines which has surfaced openly since the coup of 2000 and accentuated by the departure of paramount chiefs of 'mana' and authority who were able

to provide overarching leadership to their people, will continue to be a cause for grave concern. Compared to the other coups, there is now a greater danger of the weakening of the moral authority of the basic ethnic Fijian institutions. There are many Fijians who think that the military, the GCC and other elected leaders did not act in their best interests. The question then arises: What institution can now claim to represent all ethnic Fijians?

Unlike 1987 and 2000, neither race nor the protection of indigenous rights was an issue in 2006. This crisis was widely perceived as a tussle for power between a Fijian military and Fijian government. As a result, the kind of intense international agitation that accompanied the earlier crises largely at the behest of Indo-Fijian communities abroad had not eventuated this time. Nor is there much sign of active or effective local protest. A part of the reason is that the issues are not starkly defined in racial or ethnic terms. Many support Commodore Bainimarama's stated intentions for staging the coup, ridding the country of bad governance and corruption, but disapprove of his method. More puzzling is the quiescent reaction of the indigenous Fijians, the overwhelming majority of whom had supported Laisenia Qarase's party just a few months before. One reason may be that their traditional institutions, the Great Council of Chiefs and the Methodist Church, have changed sides and now support the coup, even if out of necessity rather than choice. But culturally, military prowess and demonstration of physical strength, not abstract ideology, are highly esteemed virtues in Fijian society, which may partly explain the Fijians' accommodating response. 'Fijians very quickly shift to where power lies,' a Fijian elder told me. 'We are a pragmatic people.'

From overseas -- Australia, New Zealand, the Forum and Commonwealth Secretariats, the United Nations Security Council -- came unequivocal support for the Qarase government. In their staunch commitment to the right of the democratically elected government, they allowed no understanding or sympathy for Bainimarama and others. The sharpness of New Zealand's reaction is probably attributable, in part at least, to its failed attempt to broker a peace between Qarase and Bainimarama and the feeling that the latter acted in bad faith from the outset, having no intention of engaging in meaningful negotiation. Australia's displeasure probably arises from seeing its foreign policy

initiatives in the region falter. Despite decades of benign engagement with the region through a series of bi-lateral and multilateral initiatives, Australia's reputation has been at its lowest in decades. That said, there is no denying genuine dismay in both Wellington and Canberra at the overthrow of a democratically elected government in Fiji.

The reaction of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu) is at odds with the response of its bigger neighbours. At the meeting of its Foreign Ministers in Honiara on 12 January 2007, the Group declared that 'the political situation in Fiji is an internal matter that can only be resolved by the people of Fiji using constitutional and democratic processes.' The ministers were content with the assurance that 'rule of law and human rights will be observed, and that a democratic government through the holding of a general election would be held within a reasonable time frame.'⁴² The MSG's lack of sympathy for Qarase's government was surprising as on 30 October 2005, the government of Papua New Guinea had awarded the then Fijian prime minister the 'Star of Melanesia,' for bringing political stability to Fiji and for promoting business and commerce in the region.⁴³ The MSG's reaction puts the Melanesian states at odds with the views of their larger neighbours, Australia and New Zealand, and with international organizations such as the European Union, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the United Nations. It has been suggested that the Melanesian reaction may, in part, be due to their currently hostile attitude to Australia in particular. Be that as it may, the MSG's support for the military coup in Fiji will come in time to be seen as short-sighted and ultimately counterproductive.

In the Indo-Fijian community, there had always been a marked lack of sympathy for the Qarase government which came upon the back of George Speight's coup in 2000. They were victims of the Qarase government's many racially-based pro-Fijian policies in education, the civil service and in the public sector generally. The government did not give the impression of being interested in the welfare of the non-Fijian community. 'What was on offer,' wrote an Indo-Fijian academic, 'was a dismal public management

⁴² From the Press Release of the meeting, issued on 13 Jan 2007.

⁴³ The other awardees were Sir Allan Kemakeza of the Solomon Islands and Ham Lini Vanuarora of Vanuatu.

record, a race-based resource allocation regime, continuing tolerance of public racial abuse of a community by colleagues, and a range of exclusionary policies.’⁴⁴

Many in the Qarase government supported the 2000 coup and even benefited from it. Their sudden conversion to democracy is therefore politically expedient and unconvincing. For these reasons, many Indo-Fijians, now around a third of the population, silently supported Bainimarama’s so-called ‘clean up campaign.’ But it would be wrong to suggest that Indo-Fijians, as a community, have rallied behind the commander. They have not though their condemnation of the coup has been expressed through muted murmurs rather than the vigorous campaigns that greeted past crises. Nonetheless, some nationalist Fijians are accusing Indo-Fijians of providing the military with moral and even financial support. They could therefore bear the brunt of Fijian anger redirected against the military. They may unwittingly get caught in the crossfire between the military and Fijians opposed to it.

Unlike 1987 or 2000, calls for a sympathetic understanding of the military’s position have come from unlikely quarters. Fr Kevin Barr is one of Fiji’s more enlightened church leaders. In a newspaper article, he wrote: ‘If we look at the military takeover from the perspective of democracy, it stands condemned in principle. However there is another perspective which needs to be considered.’ He went on: ‘Does the protection of ‘democracy and the rule of law’ have to be the only consideration when a military takeover has occurred? Is ‘democracy’ to be understood only in its narrow Western context and to be measured only by the criteria of free and fair elections? Are wider considerations such as those of social justice also relevant and important in assessing what has happened recently in Fiji? Could it be that the future in Fiji will be more truly democratic and people-centered, more just and more inclusive because of the Military takeover and clean-up?’⁴⁵ Questions such as these are being asked throughout the country, by members of all ethnic groups and social classes, suggesting the unpopularity of the Qarase government’s six years in office.

⁴⁴ Subhas Appana, ‘Can’t blame our Indians now,’ *Fiji Times Online*, 22 Dec 2006.

⁴⁵ Paulo Baleinakorodawa, Kevin Barr and Semisi Qalowasa, ‘Crisis Brings Uncertainty: What about opportunity?’ in *Fiji Sun* 17 December, 2006.

The 2006 coup is visible in Suva, whereas in the sugar cane belt of Western Viti Levu and in Vanua Levu, its impact is barely noticeable, beyond a few stray military checkpoints on the periphery of urban centres. In 1987 and, to a lesser extent in 2000, the life in the Indo-Fijian areas was severely disrupted. In 1987, boycotts against the coup in the sugar industry affected the cane belt severely, and in 2000, Indo-Fijian areas on the Rewa delta were terrorized for food (cattle, root crops), forcing many to flee to refugee camps in Lautoka. This coup has left a different impression. Incidents of violent crime and burglary in urban areas are noticeably down. People feel personally safe on the streets and in their homes. The military's determination to prevent a breakdown in law and order has had its impact, and is an important reason for gathering public support for it, although its recent concerted effort to quell dissent has raised concern among human rights activists.

It has been asked whether removing Laisenia Qarase and Commodore Bainimarama from their respective offices would have helped resolve the impasse. Personality did play a part and Qarase was more accommodating and moderate in public, as he had to be, though his critics argued that he was dangerously deceptive, a reassuring face of Fijian nationalism, the very soul of sweet reasonableness. Qarase is a self-avowed Fijian nationalist who is not necessarily antagonistic to the other communities. Bainimarama, heading an almost exclusively Fijian institution, the military, is an avowed multiracialist, although in television interviews, he appears awkwardly assertive, even dogmatically authoritarian. His multiracialism may be a legacy of his education at the elite multiracial Marist Brothers High School in Suva. Qarase is a product of the exclusively Fijian (Queen Victoria) and European (until the early 1960s) Suva Boys Grammar.

But this crisis goes beyond personalities. It is clear that the military now seeks a more enlarged, permanent public role for itself. It does not wish to remain simply an institution of the state but seeks to play an important role in the affairs of the state. 'Prevention is better than cure,' a senior military officer told me. 'It is better to prevent the mess from taking place in the first place than to be called to clean it up afterwards.' He was referring to the role the military had to play in rescuing the country from the crisis of 2000. He cited Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey as models. Along with the parliament and

(until recently) the Great Council of Chiefs, the military regards itself as a major centre of power in Fiji and it is there to remain.

Could the crisis have been avoided? Bainimarama was adamant that he would proceed with his 'clean up' campaign whatever the cost, but he had stated his intention to take on the government almost three years ago. His intention to execute the coup was probably the longest announced in recent history. His tactic differed from those employed by Sitiveni Rabuka in 1987. Then, Rabuka delivered a single, surgical strike on a single day, abrogated the constitution immediately and soon afterwards declared Fiji a republic. His actions stunned the nation. In 2006, Bainimarama deposed the government through 'death by hemorrhage' over a long period. His demands were clear and his intention unmistakable. He hoped that unrelenting pressure would crack the government and force it to accede to his demands. But the SDL government, buoyed by overwhelming Fijian support in the May 2006 elections, and riding high on the wave of enthusiastic public support for the multi-party government concept, did not take the military's threat as seriously and as early as it could and should have. Indeed, for the most part, it was determined to clip the commander's wings. Clumsy efforts to have him sacked when he was out of the country and to reduce the military's budget fueled tensions. The government's attempt to foster dissent among the officer corps against Bainimarama failed. On the contrary, its actions only strengthened the support for him. By the time the government realized the resoluteness of the military's position it was too late. The military had crossed its Rubicon.

Many questions remain to ponder, and only time will provide the answers. Will Commodore Bainimarama be the charismatic messiah who will lead Fiji away from the path of corruption, bad governance, away from the era of racially polarized politics towards a better future for all its citizens or will he, like one of his military predecessors Sitiveni Rabuka, succumb to hubris and take his country back into the cul-de-sac of despair and disillusionment? Will the multiracial 1997 constitution, once hailed as the saviour of the nation, remain intact, its lights un-dimmed, or will it be emasculated and eventually snuffed out if it conflicts with the agenda and interests of those in power? Will the military, from now on, insist on having a far greater, far more visible, public role in

Fiji or will the fundamental tenets of parliamentary democracy be allowed to prevail? Will the institutions of law and order be allowed to exercise their proper function or will they do so only under the close supervision of the military? Will parliamentary democracy of the Westminster type, with all its faults and flaws, return to Fiji or will it be allowed to exist only on the sufferance of the military?

‘Anxiety, Uncertainty, and Fear’ that the now deposed Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase spoke about at the beginning of 2006, seem likely to continue to haunt Fiji well into its future.

