

Democracy by the gun

Fiji's latest coup is no straightforward clash between tyranny and democracy. **BY DAVID ROBIE**

After going from popular hero to coupster in just six years, Fiji's military strongman Commodore Voreqe "Frank" Bainimarama clings to a vision. He believes he is saving Fiji's fragile democratic flower and building a multiracial future.

His bloodless seizure of power this month was the final act in "cleaning up" unfinished business from the May 2000 coup.

Since May 29, 2000, when he dashed hostage Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry's hopes of being reinstated as the country's first Indo-Fijian leader by declaring martial law 10 days after the coup, the military chief has sought to restore Fiji's place in the sun.

Back then, he appointed banker and political novice Laisenia Qarase as caretaker premier in the wake of that coup by renegade businessman George Speight, whose rebel soldier gunmen held Chaudhry and his Cabinet at gunpoint for 56 days.

Bainimarama is not the opportunistic tyrant he is often portrayed as. He felt a deep sense of betrayal by Qarase, especially over corruption, the premier's plan to pardon Speight, and three racially divisive bills being railroaded through Parliament:

- The Racial Tolerance and Unity Bill – described by critics as an "insulting" violation of the human rights of the 2000 coup victims and condemned by former US ambassador David Lyons;
- The Qoliqoli Bill, which threatened to cripple tourism by granting indigenous Fijians the right to claim royalties from other ethnic groups using coastal waters; and
- The Land Claims Tribunal Bill – loosely based on the Waitangi Tribunal. But in Fiji,

where 83 per cent of land is communally-owned by indigenous Fijians and inalienable, the qoliqoli and land bills are seen as "double dipping" legislation.

Likewise, the ousted Prime Minister, twice elected with a dubious mandate on the back of post-coup fear, is not the paragon of democracy portrayed by the media and coup critics. The man who once called democracy a "dangerous delusion" has appealed to civil society groups – the very organisations he spurned in the past – to support his deposed government.

Many in Fiji see New Zealand notions of a politics-free military as naïve and hypocritical. They ask where the opposition was to the coup in Thailand, for example.

Bainimarama's hand was forced because an inefficient police force failed to prosecute the Speight coup perpetrators with sufficient zeal, and by an arrogant and racist government, hell-bent on granting a general amnesty to Speight and the plotters.

Bainimarama opposed the amnesty to end the coup culture, not feed it. Yet this is now the fourth coup in 19 years. Sitiveni Rabuka, who sparked the run of coups with two in 1987, has been acquitted of inciting a coup-related mutiny in November 2000. Rebel troops attempted to assassinate Bainimarama during the crushed mutiny. But he has been reluctant to inves-

tigate human rights allegations in the brutal killing of five renegade "counter-revolutionary" troops.

Speight was sentenced to life imprisonment for treason and is now enjoying the sunshine on the paradise prison isle of Nukulau in Suva harbour.

Bainimarama is also angry that "small fish are jailed while the big sharks get privileged jobs and power".

Then-police commissioner Isikia Savua was widely believed to be implicated in the 2000 Speight coup. The late President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara accused him on television of helping to plan the putsch. Savua denied the allegations, was not charged and was appointed Fiji's Ambassador to the United Nations.

Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, implicated in the 1987 coups, is Fiji's ambassador to Japan and Korea. Several people accused or convicted of involvement in past coups were in Qarase's cabinet.

The rebel President in 2000, Ratu Jope Seniloli, served less than four months of a four-year sentence for taking an illegal oath as the usurper head of state.

Deposed police commissioner Andrew Hughes fired radio broadsides from the safety of Australia after fleeing his Suva post. But critics argue that had he spent more time pursuing the 2000 coup perpetrators, the crisis may not have erupted.

The *Fiji Sun* embarrassed the commissioner into taking action this year with a series of disclosures, including allegations that police sought to suppress evidence and charges against the coupsters.

Qarase railed against breaches of the "rule of law" and "rape of the constitution". But many Fiji Islanders believe the Qarase government was itself raping the constitution with illegal bills.

In May 2005, Qarase's government deported deputy director of public prosecutions Peter Ridgeway with 24 hours' notice after he was too successful in convicting the coupsters.

Chaudhry, the Fiji Labour Party leader, says he will cooperate with the military regime in an effort to return Fiji to democracy, but would not join any illegal administration. "Each coup sets the country back at least 20 years," said Chaudhry.

Speculation suggests the coup is actually the "revenge of the Maras". According to this theory, Bainimarama reluctantly forced Ratu Mara from office under pressure from the Speight thugs. Mara's son-in-law, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, Bainimarama's predecessor as army chief, unsuccessfully contested this year's election at the helm of the new National Alliance Party.

Since the coup, Ganilau has been one of the most outspoken voices for cooperation with the regime.

But Bainimarama appears to have miscalculated the public support for the military. He faces a high-risk future. A popular uprising against the military could see the coup implode.

And if that happens, he will need saving. Or he could end up joining his nemesis George Speight on "paradise island". ■

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