



Observations on the current situation in Fiji

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I visited Fiji between 17 and 25 January 2007 and travelled as a tourist in the Western Division. When I met people, I introduced myself as a political philosopher interested in the events and situation following the coup of 5 December 2006.

I was easily able to talk to a good range of people in different situations and from different island groups. Most were very ready to talk, though a few after a conversation asked me not to quote them. On hearing that I am a political philosopher, quite a few wanted to ask questions and, in groups, when someone spoke, the others nestled in to hear what was said. The Indo-Fijians I met were less ready to talk, but I did manage to talk with a reasonable number.

The general view is that the government under the military is doing very good things. Especially in the West, people are really glad that corruption is being exposed, that a good cabinet has been selected, that officials are being scrutinized and screened, and that government costs are being cut. There is a clear view that concerns going back to the 1987 coups and the coup and military intervention in 2000 are being addressed. (There is a difference of view abroad about whether this is the fourth or fifth coup.) These views spread to the other island groups, so far as I can see. People admit that these were not their first reactions, which had more to do with alarm at another coup and concern that previous experiences of violence, lawlessness and poverty would be relived. The people are now hoping that economic improvement will come and that inequality will be rectified.

Their concerns are firstly with the illegality of the coup. The military may be doing the right thing, but their method was wrong. This has an ethical as well as legal dimension – is it right? I have had some interesting conversations about this. The second concern is about whether the constitution will be preserved. This is an issue of whether they will have stable and reasonable government. It is important, because the constitution has been broken – can it be stabilized? Finally, there are concerns about what the military are doing to some people. I spoke with a woman, whose cousin had been taken to Queen Elizabeth Barracks, where she was hit with a rifle butt and made to crawl along a drain. The cousin had been active and outspoken in a pro-democracy organization.

I asked several people about who might still be against the new arrangements. The general answer is ‘those who were in power’. It seems that these are a small group of the paramount chiefs centred on Lau and Bau, who are related by marriage and who have been accustomed to sharing political influence. I noticed that Adi Finau, a lady of high status from Bau, whom I met in Suva in 2006 and who had been a cabinet minister twice after coups, is now protesting with a women’s group for democracy. The general perception is that there has been a lot of political collusion going back to Ratu Kamasese Mara’s time. There are others speaking against the coup, generally people involved in pro-democracy or civil rights groups and organisations or academics and other professionals.

The public popular reactions support this general view of things. I attended a Methodist Church service on Sunday. The preacher talked about the national troubles but in his long Fijian sermon said that it was all part of God’s plan – it will work out for good. When I talked with him later, he said that this had not been his initial reaction and that he still did not agree with the method but that good things were happening. (The Methodist Church was generally at first very much against this coup, though supportive or silent about the 1987 and 2000 coups. In Fiji a lot of politics gets done in church, and indigenous Fijians are very proud of being Christian.)

The Catholic Archbishop of Fiji, Petero Mataca, recognised in the early days of the coup that, despite his concern about unconstitutional actions by the military, much of what they were doing had to do with the rectification of existing injustice. Later in an opinion piece in *The Fiji Times* (23/1/07), he affirmed the legality of the new Interim Government and encouraged his people to get on with their lives. He claimed that democracy and the rule of law had broken down long before the 2006 coup and listed a number of issues of social justice that still need to be rectified and the virtues that Fijians would need to develop in order to make Fiji a better place. He explained that Fiji was still in the process of learning how to live as a just and equitable society in which the human dignity of all was respected.

At the moment, there is even a level of euphoria about what is happening. For example, according to a newspaper report (*Fiji Sun* 18/1/07) the taxi drivers' organization has appealed for the military to take over the Land Transport Authority – they think they will get a fairer and quicker outcome. In another report, *The Daily Post* (18/1/07) gave the lead article on the back page to a teacher who is calling for the military to take over the Fiji Secondary Schools Rugby Union, which the teacher claimed has become too political to function properly. This euphoria will not necessarily last, especially if things go wrong or if the promised gains from the changes do not materialize quickly enough.

It is clear that Bainimarama and the military are playing things very carefully. It seems that the coup as such is over – immunity from prosecution for actions relating to the assumption of power was given for 5 December to 5 January. Now the Interim Government is in place. Bainimarama is Interim Prime Minister as well as Chief of the Republic of Fiji Military Force (RFMF). There is, indeed, some effort on the Government's part to not use the term 'coup' but rather to say that the RFMF 'assumed power'. It is significant that the Fiji Law Society has withheld its prepared statement on the illegality of the situation and is waiting to see how things turn out.

There is a lot of talk about 'the rule of law' and 'the independence of the judiciary', even though the fundamental change is being brought by force and by an unelected government. They are, nevertheless, keen to have the law working again quickly. A complex example has to do with the CEO of the Sugar Canes Growers Council, Mr Lami. He had been sacked by the military but reinstated by the court, at least until there is further discussion in court. The military visited him during this week and during the interview he suffered from chest pains and was taken to hospital. The military were adamant that they had visited him not to remove him from office contrary to the court order but to begin investigations into corrupt behaviour. Police were present and there is no suggestion that there was any physical violence.

In another case, the Chief Justice, Mr Fatiaki, has been suspended even though as Chief Justice he had constitutional protection, and an Acting Chief Justice has been installed. The Interim Attorney General, however, has insisted that the Judicial Commission (made up of judges) investigate claims of corrupt conduct against the Chief Justice, so as 'to preserve the independence of the judiciary'. It appears that the Interim Government, while allowing no obstructions to be put in its way, is attempting to act within the law as far as possible.

There is now a growing effort by the military to distance themselves from involvement in the new government. The question was raised during the week about whether the former Prime Minister, Mr Quarese, who is banished to his home village on Lau, could come to Suva to meet with the Eminent Persons Group from the Pacific Islands Forum, which is investigating the reasons for the coup and the potential for things to rectify themselves. The military spokesman said that it was not a matter for the military but for the Foreign Minister.

Similarly, when interviewing officials against whom they are going to act, the military now take police officers. My understanding is that the police are not much in favour of the military operation but that their presence is an attempt to maintain 'the rule of law' and to ensure that violence is not used.

Bainimarama is doing a lot of good things. There have been daily revelations of previous corruption and investigations to root it out. He has appointed a civilian cabinet from across the political spectrum that all say is one of high quality. A lot of credibility has been given to Mr Chaudry as Finance Minister. There have been attempts to cut Government expenditure. Most stunningly the heads (CEOs) of government departments were all dismissed and the better of them are being rehired as Permanent Secretaries on a much lower salary - \$80,000 against \$120,000. All seem to think that there will now be a fairer distribution of goods. It is, nevertheless, the case that a lot of water has to flow under the bridge before the situation is resolved and many things could happen in the meantime.

Bainimarama is clearly one used to command. His statements are made in plain language without embellishment. Neither he nor the other prominent military persons present as politicians. The military spokesman, Major Neumi Leweni, who seems to be the minder at press conferences and who gives almost daily reports, looks like he could not be less interested in the whole thing and, apart from his care with words, appears to be totally unaware that he is being televised. This is a sharp contrast with career politicians, who are usually fairly sensitive about their appearance, even if they take care not to appear vain. The military and Interim Government are, nevertheless, running a very effective media campaign with daily revelations of previous corruption and daily announcements of significant changes in governmental arrangements.

The presence of military checkpoints around the island seems to be keeping law and order, unlike during the last coup, and people are saying that Suva is safer than it has been for a long time. A number of black market liquor shops have been closed down. The return to order is lifting people's spirits. People are even saying now that the bad things that happened at the Barracks were done by soldiers who had been to Iraq and learnt bad behaviour from the Americans. (I doubt that the opinion is true, but it is an indicator of the current mood and also of the way in which Fijians are trying to make sense of the events around them.)

I had a very interesting discussion with a small group of Fijians about whether the coup was right. Clearly the short answer is 'No'. However, the longer answer is that everyone is watching carefully and that the final judgement might be different. Few of the public seem to have known what was going on before, either in the government or in the Great Council of Chiefs, and people are startled at the revelations now being made. Perhaps there was no other way to bring about change. A big issue will be how the military behaves. So far, it has remained disciplined. What should people do? It is clearly better to keep one's head down and wait. If things do go wrong then one might need to protest, but one also needs to know that protest could end up in bloodshed. As one man said, 'If they stick to their plan, it will be good'. A course of events has begun, perhaps the best thing is to try and see it through. In a country, where local communities are run by chiefs, a less democratic form of government is not as troubling as it would be elsewhere. Part of the question seemed to be whether, in fact, a flat democracy is the only option for government.

A common saying is, 'This coup is not like other coups'. It is Fijian against Fijian rather than Fijian against Indo-Fijian. To date, there has been no appreciable violence, nor has there been any civil disturbance. For the moment at least, the general security situation has improved rather than deteriorated. What is happening appears to be very public as corruption is exposed and changes are announced. Specific issues have been identified very quickly, which suggests a well-organised plan and serious regard for the common good. The moves and changes are clearly directed to the benefit of a wide range of Fijians rather than a select few. This is leading Fijians to reflect seriously about the events and what they might mean.

In another discussion, a woman asked what would be needed for people later on to judge the military well. We concluded that it needed four things – that the time of the Interim Government be as short as possible and that a timetable for elections be published as soon as possible; that the Interim Government bring good changes and reduce corruption; that the army remain disciplined and not harm people unnecessarily; that military officers not stand for election afterwards. Expectations for the life of the Interim Government range from 15 months to 5 years.

It seems that people are accepting that at the root of the coup is the issue of justice – share in political voice and share in the distribution of goods. The role of the chiefs, the assumptions at Independence and the consequences of the previous coups are all factors in the equation. There seems to have been collusion for political office among a small group of Paramount Chiefs and this has led to failure to distribute economic benefits well. There is also concern about the role of the lesser Village and District Chiefs. Many of them are not well educated and perhaps have been too easily led to the wrong decisions.

One of the very difficult issues is land ownership. Most land is under native title and can be leased only through the Native Lands Board. It seems that little of the money raised gets back to the owners, most of it going to the government. Conversely, the Fijians have been reluctant to renew leases for sugar cane farms, which has hurt the Indo-Fijian population greatly. It is clear that the Interim Government wants to fix this, both to get better returns for the land owners and to ensure that viable land is well used to the economic benefit of the country. It appears that Bainimarama or his officers have spoken to most of the Paramount and District Chiefs about this, at least on Viti Levu.

Australia and New Zealand would be wise to adjust their responses to the situation. The travel bans on government officials are getting a lot of publicity. Bainimarama has lifted the stakes – ‘We have relied for too long on our metropolitan neighbours and they are taking us for granted’. (*Fiji Times* 22/1/07) There is talk of reverse sanctions, which has raised some unusual concerns – how will we get our children to clean their teeth, if the label on the toothpaste tube is written in Malaysian? The real issue is more serious, and I think that Bainimarama is prepared to play for high stakes. Like most non-francophone South Pacific Island peoples, the Fijians know that, for reasons of geography, history and language, they are stuck with Australia and New Zealand and call them ‘Big Brothers’. However, some Australian and New Zealand policies and the interpersonal behaviour of some senior politicians grate on their nerves. We in Australia should take seriously, as will other Pacific states, Bainimarama’s efforts to develop closer relations with Asian countries.

Australia and New Zealand need to find ways both to support the recognisable reforms and to maintain good relations with Fiji. Bainimarama asked for help in setting up a new anti-corruption commission and help was refused on the basis of the illegality of his government. This was not very smart.

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