ABSTRACT

Amidst the Pacific Island States, Fiji is singular for the political role of its servicemen and several military coups d'état. The various coups have been operated with opposite aims: in 1987, the soldiers declared that they intervened to protect the interest of the Melanesian Fijians, which were seen by the nationalists as threatened by the first multiracial government. In December 2006, in contrast, the Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces affirmed that they took action to establish a truly democratic system, taking a stand against the ethnic-based, pro-Melanesian policy that was conducted.

KEYWORDS

Fiji, Military, Politics, Coup, Nationalism, Militarism.

INTRODUCTION:

DEMOCRACY OR APARTHEID?

Fiji as always been characterised by militarism. The pre-colonial society was largely based on warfare. The British administration, as well as the Christian missions, ended the armed conflicts, but the Fijians, heirs to a powerful war tradition, sought its maintenance, adapted it and used it to strengthen their political power; first under the framework of colonisation, then to prepare independence and to provide their sovereign country with a noteworthy place on the international scene. Recognised and valued for their successful participation in multinational peacekeeping missions since 1978, the Fijian soldiers surprised the world by also conducting coups in their own country; and, moreover, coups that are definitely contradictory in their objectives.

The Republic of the Fiji Islands has a population of 835000 inhabitants. Nearly 40% of them are Indo-Fijians, mostly born in Fiji to parents born there, and they do not have any connection with India anymore, despite a strong Indian culture. Their ancestors arrived several generations ago. The movement has been massive: between 1879 and 1916, more than 60000 Indian indentured labourers, including women and children, were transported to Fiji. Many settled there. The 1921 census showed 84000 Fijians and 60000 Indians (there were also 12000 Europeans, Chinese, Rotumans and others).

Nevertheless, they are still called Indians, both commonly and officially (until a few months ago), in order to differentiate them from the Indigenous Fijians and the citizens of other origins. The 1998 Constitution (abrogated in April 2009) established separate electoral rolls, according to the voters’ registration as Fijians; Indians; Rotumans; or others.

Such a raced-based organisation could not create a common national identity. “Indigenous Fijians were instilled with fear of dominance and dispossession by Indo-Fijians, and they desired protection of their status as the indigenous people. Indo-Fijians, on the other hand, felt alienated and marginalised, as second class citizens in their own country, the country of their birth[1]”. So, in 1987, took place the first military coup d'état to occur in the Pacific.

1 Part of the “Statement of the Prime minister of the Republic of the Fiji Islands to the 62nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly New York - September, 2007”.

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THE RABUKA’S COUPS:  
DEFENDING THE MELANESIANS’ INTERESTS.

In May 1987, Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, number three in the Royal Fiji Military Forces hierarchy, and descendant of customary warriors, overthrew the government. His “Operation Sunrise” was carefully planned and prepared; the RFMF followed him. He declared to have taken action in order to preserve the interest of the Fijians against the Indians.

This was the first military coup of the history of Oceania. A second one occurred soon after: in September of the same year, Sitiveni Rabuka ousted the government again and declared Fiji a Republic. In 1990, a new Constitution was endorsed, establishing the Fijian prominence. For years, the Rabuka government placed Army officers in many posts of responsibilities.

The RFMF; henceforth Republic of Fiji Military Forces, greatly grew in strength, equipment, budget. As a member of a customary warrior clan, a Methodist preacher and a peacekeeping operations hero, Sitiveni Rabuka had charisma and authority in Fiji. He kept the political power for more than ten years during which, despite strong international reproof against his regime, the Fijian peacekeepers remained appreciated and welcome in the United Nations’ missions.

In 1997, still in power, Sitiveni Rabuka instigated the adoption of a new Constitution, supposed to be and considered as progressive. Its provisions maintained some of the Fijians’ advantages, but the Indians had significant rights.

In 1999, the Labour Party won the general elections and its leader, Indo-Fijian Mahendra Chaudhry, became Prime minister. Even more than in 1987, the access of the Indo-Fijians to the political power was a reality. The Melanesian nationalists could not bear it.

THE SPEIGHT’S COUP:  
THE REVERSAL OF THE MILITARY

In May 2000, George Speight, a half-European businessman, leading an action with members of the RFMF Special Forces, took Fiji’s Parliament hostage for 56 days. The support of the Army was expected, but its Commander, Commodore Bainimarama, backed by the large majority of his men, opposed the coup. He declared the martial law, negotiated with the putsch leader, succeeded in having the hostages released and the weapons returned. Moreover, he had the rebels arrested, and, after only a few weeks gave the power back to civilians.

A provisional government was installed, led by Laisenia Qarase. Commodore Bainimarama and his supporters intended to see all the instigators of the coup uncovered and punished. But L. Qarase and his followers revealed themselves to be in favour of the Melanesian prominence.

They were maintained in power by the general elections of 2001 and 2006. Despite obvious racist policies, the Qarase governments were also approved by the international community.

Bainimarama also stayed in place as Commander RFMF. He too had many supporters, including the President. For years, he opposed L. Qarase and his policy. Despite visible tensions and dissensions within the RFMF, the “Commodore” remained their legitimate and rightful commander. Steadily, he opposed the government. With him, therefore, the servicemen did the same, refusing what the Commodore and his supporters saw as non-democratic policy. They demanded the abandonment of outdated and unfair provisions that favoured the Melanesian and disadvantaged the Indian half of the country’s population notwithstanding their hundred-year old presence in Fiji.

COMMODORE BAINIMARAMA’S COUP:  
PLEDGING TRUE DEMOCRACY

On December 5th, 2006, conducting a bloodless coup, Commodore Bainimarama removed the Qarase government. He dissolved the Parliament and, after a few weeks, assumed the title and responsibilities of Prime minister, according to a President’s decision that the High Court of Fiji ruled legal in October 2008.

Bainimarama announced and launched an anti-corruption campaign and non-racial provisions. In late 2007, the President established a 45-member National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF), and officially launched the Peoples Charter initiative, in order to “to rebuild Fiji into a non-racial, culturally vibrant, united, well-governed, truly democratic nation; a nation that seeks progress and prosperity”.

Under external and internal pressure, he pledged to organise truly democratic elections by March 2009. But as this date came near, he changed his mind, explaining that the elections would take place when the country would be ready and when the reforms he thought necessary would be completed. This volte-face has been highly criticised, but one could remember that in 2000 Commodore Bainimarama relinquished power after a few weeks only: maybe he can be trusted to step back again. He declares: “The coups of 1987 and 2000 were executed in the interests of a few, based on ethno-nationalism, racism, and greed. The events of 5 December, 2006 were not for any such extremest motivation. In 2000, in quelling the civilian-led coup, as Commander of the Fiji Military Forces, I had played a pivotal role in the handing of political power to a civilian government. Through the Peoples Charter initiative, I am seeking to empower the people of Fiji at large, to find just and sustainable solutions to our deep rooted and persistent problems. I wish to assure the international community that I am, personally, deeply committed to breaking the cycle of coups. Equally important, I am committed to breaking the cycle of bad and unjust governance which Fiji has suffered, since May, 1987. To remove the “coup culture”, and to commit to democratic and just governance and the rule of law, it is imperative that policies which promote racial supremacy, and which further the interests of self-seeking political, religious and traditional elites, are removed, once and for all.”

In April 2009, the Court of Appeal ruled that the interim government was illegal and that the President should appoint a new caretaker Prime minister. President Iloilo decided to
abrogate the Constitution, announced that an interim government would be tasked to lead the country and implement a wide reform prior to general elections that would be organised before September 2014. Ratu Iloilo re-appointed Commodore Bainimarama as Prime Minister. “Frank” re-appointed the same Ministers.

Apart from the fact that servicemen who overthrow an elected government, post officers in the media newsrooms and dismiss the judges cannot be considered as democrats, it is necessary to acknowledge that the reasons announced for taking power and the policy conducted are neither racist nor nationalist. On this point, the Fiji military have changed.

CONCLUSION:
THE FIJI MILITARY,
STRONG POLITICAL COMMITMENT
TO OPPOSITE OBJECTIVES

For long, the Military Forces in Fiji had been the strong support of the long-established customary leaders, particularly by conducting the two coups of 1987 behind S. Rabuka, to protect the traditional Melanesian interest.

From 2000, with Commodore Bainimarama, the Army completely changed its position, championing equal rights for all the citizens, contesting the archaic customary and religious power. Either by supporting or opposing by force the customary chiefs, the elected governments or the putschists, the Fijian soldiers play a major political role.

The Commodore, without a doubt, according to internationally accepted principles, is a military commander who conducts a coup d'état; therefore, he is the complete contrary of a Democrat. Anyway, F. Bainimarama recently stated: "Since April [2008], we have been consistently pointing out that to restore democracy through a free and fair election, it is necessary to first change Fiji’s electoral system. Fiji’s current electoral system is undemocratic; it does not provide for a free and fair election; and it contravenes the principles of equal suffrage as set out in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. The case for a reform of the electoral system is compelling. Fiji must have a non-racial and truly democratic electoral system. It is imperative, therefore, that we address the issue of electoral reform”.

Either for or against the established power, in the historical, social and political context of Fiji, the positions and actions of Frank Bainimarama and the RFMF have definite logic and coherence. By assuming political and administrative authority they perpetuate the ancient role of the pre-colonial warriors.

The numerous publications about Fiji and the Fijian military include research works and reports by
- F. Clunie,
- V. Cretton,
- E. Dean,
- F. Doumenge,
- M. Field,
- G. Finin,
- S. Firth,
- J. Fraenkel,
- W. Halapua,
- R. Howlett,
- E. Huffer,
- B. V. Lal,
- P. Larmour,
- S. Lawson,
- W. Narsey,
- S. Ratuva,
- A. Ravuvu,
- B. Reilly,
- S. Ritova,
- J. Sanday,
- J. Sharpam,
- T. Teiwa,
- M. Tuimaleali‘ifano.

Some information and views they contain, as well as some found on the RFMF website, have been used to compose this article.

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