

Fiji for the Fijians

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Suddenly out of nowhere, the South Pacific islands of Fiji known to the outside world mainly for their export of sugar, the largest resource of mahogany and the splendour of their beaches where tourists from rich countries would flock to swim and while away their worries, began to make news in the middle of May this year. A self-proclaimed champion of the rights of the indigenous people, who, he believed, had been suffering under the oppressive domination of the minority ethnic Indians, had risen in revolt and toppled the established order.

His prescription to heal the wounds of discrimination - the abrogation of the multi-racial Constitution that gave the Republic of Fiji Islands its first Prime Minister of Indian origin and the disenfranchisement of the ethnic Indian population, that represents 44 per cent of the total, to forestall similar prospects in the future - sent shock waves around the world where democracy, irrespective of objective conditions prevailing in a society, is currently the in-thing.

In order to set off the process of reversing the situation the coup leader, George Speight, who possessed no political experience nor military background and was little known beyond the shores of his own country, stormed into the Parliament building at Suva, the capital, with the help of a small band of seven armed men and took Prime Minister Mahendra Pal Chaudhry and 30 others hostage, on May 19, the first anniversary of Chaudhry's installation.

He 'dismissed' the Prime Minister whose grandfather had been among the indentured labourers transported in 1912 to the islands by the British from their native land to work on sugar plantations and processing plants. In the main, the migration of labourers had taken place in 1870s and 1880s after the British had found the soil and climatic conditions of their new colony suitable for the production of sugar and the local people too 'indolent' to put in the hard work required. A large majority of these farm and factory workers never returned to India even after their contracts had expired and made Fiji their home. In course of time they spread out farther afield and took to other more lucrative occupations such as commerce and industry. They proved energetic businessmen, prospered and proliferated. They now have a virtual monopoly of commercial business and own the major means of production on the islands.

At the time of independence from the British in 1970, they were the majority ethnic group in the country outnumbering the indigenous population by 240,000 to 202,000 (with 30,000 of other races), but then as better prospects beckoned them elsewhere a large number of them moved out of the constricted surroundings of the island state. The political conditions after Sitiveni Rabuka, now heading the GCC, took over as Prime Minister favoured the Fijians which also led to their exodus. These factors combined with relatively low birth rate that goes with an improved life-style reduced them to a minority: 44 per cent as against 51 per cent Fijians. The current rumpus and uncertainty are, in all likelihood, going to compel a lot more of ethnic Indians to migrate. While that would work to the detriment of local economy, at least for the short- and medium-term, it would weaken their political clout and that is what the recent coup has been all about.

Judging from the supine response of the country's various centres of power, including the armed forces, to this criminal act, it would not appear illogical to assume that the coup leader had their tacit support. No doubt Speight was not alone in the violent expression of frustration at being marginalised by an 'alien' minority in the key sectors of economy.

He had obviously done his homework and per-

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sued others to join him in his crusade, in an overt or covert manner. Right when he was making his initial move, a crowd of about 1600 was, not far from the legislature, ransacking business premises and houses and, in quite a few cases, torching the properties of their perceived oppressors. And as later events showed his call for laying "the foundation for change once and for all in the affairs of the country" in line with the wishes of the indigenous Fijians did rally a number of people behind him. Like Speight, they took to unconstitutional means to press their point. They took over police stations and villages, blocked roads and highways, cut off the supply of water to Monosavu hydel power station that till today is unable to generate electricity.

To a dispassionate observer of events it appears quite strange that the President, the Great Council of the Chiefs (GCC) - a traditional body of tribal chiefs which, among other things, has the Constitu-

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tional role of appointing the President and the Vice President, the army and its designated Prime Minister should concede one demand after another of Speight without putting up a credible resistance. They acted listlessly as he blustered and bullied, openly threatening the lives of hostages. The President (Ratu Kamisese Mara who left office after the army take-over on May 29), in a nation-wide TV address, called the hostage takers and their supporters in the streets as a "terrorist group", but in a matter of days appeared to accept their political grievances by assuring them that he had taken note of their concerns. Shortly before the army moved in to impose martial law, he asked the Prime Minister to tender his resignation, who had been elected democratically under the Constitution and was presiding over a multi-ethnic administration. The President's call tended to formalise the action of dismissal that Speight had taken immediately following the civilian coup. The powerful army which had initially backed the Constitution, also quickly caved in to Speight's demands.

Commodore Frank Mabin, head of the armed forces, took shelter behind the declared aim of getting "the kids back to school, and shops open for business again" for his inaction against the rebel leader, ostensibly not to worsen the law and order situation. Even his reputation of being "a quiet, reflective man who believed in constitutional norms" could not justify his weak-kneed stance, especially

as the coup leader had acted in manifest defiance of the Constitution. The situation demanded a tough response from him. It might be possible that "the counter-revolutionary warfare unit" as hinted by President Mara might be assisting Speight.

Laisenia Qarase, the Prime Minister appointed by the army, openly and not mincing matters ruled out a return to the multi-racial Constitution of 1997 which had earlier been abrogated by Bainimarama in compliance with the demand of the rebel leader. His task was to draw up a new one that ensured that "the interests of the Fijian community must not be subordinated to those of other communities and hence the principle of paramountcy of the indigenous Fijian interests". However, Qarase's assurances that "no one will be disenfranchised" deserve due credence not the least because reneging on the basic democratic principle of the right to vote would provoke severe reaction from the international community. Basically a banker, he knew that any outside punitive action would hit the economy, already in the doldrums since the disturbances began, hard and throw it into a tailspin. Thirty-two per cent of its export earnings of around \$650 million come from sugar and a major part of the rest from 250,000 tourists who visit Fijian resort islands every year. Already some countries, including Britain, have imposed sanctions.

Thus the crisis lingered on with the deposed Prime Minister and most of his colleagues languishing in the Parliament building where armed men in civilian clothes had, at one stage, beaten him up. Only when the military and the GCC had bowed to Speight's demands that he be released and released the hostages. The Constitution is revoked and he and his men enjoy amnesty. But the drama is not over yet.

The conspiracy theorists seem to have figured out correctly by maintaining that there exists a strong undercurrent of support among the circles that matter for the feelings of discrimination at the hands of the minority ethnic community. At the same time, the dilemma is that even if Speight has been acting as a front man of powerful elements in the country it is not possible for them to go the whole hog with his demands which are reminiscent of the apartheid era: the Indians living on the islands for well over a century to be treated as "long-term guests but not equal citizens".

Amid continuing negotiations and disagreement between Speight and others, the story now has taken another turn; the coup leader has demanded the appointment of Fiji's High Commissioner to Malaysia, Samanunu Cakobau, the great grand-daughter of Fiji's 'king' who had signed cession with the British in 1974, as Prime Minister with the purpose of implementing his plan of converting Fiji into a state based on racial exclusion. This has prompted reports that all along the GCC, or at least the dominant Bau tribe in it, was behind the two-month long turmoil.

The entire perspective of the so-called agitation carried out "in the name of indigenous Fijians" changes when the Speight's blemished business record is factored in. Characterised as a failed businessman - he denied he had been declared a bankrupt - he has been accused of currency fraud. More significant in the context of his present campaign, he had been removed by Mr Chaudhry as chairman of two Fijian enterprises dealing in the lucrative timber trade. He had been appointed to these posts by the former government of Rabuka in which his father, Sam Speight, was a senior member.

The personal motives of George Speight, who is not a full-blooded Fijian but of a European-Fijian mixed stock, in crusading for the rights of the indigenous people of the island state gives a completely different colour to the crisis.