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Fiji Islands Political Crisis: Background, Analysis, and Chronology

(name redacted)

Analyst in Asian Affairs
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

On May 19, 2000, Fijian businessman George Speight and his followers took Prime Minister Mehendra Chaudhry, an ethnic Indian Fijian, and 30 government and parliamentary officials hostage in an attempt to return the political system to indigenous Fijian dominance. The Fiji military appointed an interim civilian government, negotiated the release of the hostages on July 14, 2000, and then arrested Speight on July 26, 2000. Although the interim civilian government expressed disapproval of Speight's actions, it also indicated plans to create a new Constitution that bars Indo-Fijians from the position of Prime Minister. On November 16, 2000, the Fiji High Court found the formation of the interim government and abrogation of the 1997 Constitution illegal. The United States has demanded a swift restoration of democratic government in Fiji.

Background

Fiji's Importance in the Region. The Republic of the Fiji Islands has the second largest population (813,000 persons) among Pacific Island states, after Papua New Guinea; and second highest per capita income, after the Cook Islands. Many observers regard the Fijian economy as one of the most viable and potentially prosperous in the region.¹ Prior to the 1987 coups, described below, many political analysts regarded Fiji as a model of democratic, multi-ethnic government. Even in undemocratic periods, political violence has been relatively minimal and most human rights have remained protected.² Fiji and Papua New Guinea are the only two South Pacific nations to have significant armed forces. Fijians assisted the Allied forces in both world wars and have contributed to ten United Nations peacekeeping operations. Fiji is also the home of the University of the South Pacific, which serves students from 12 Pacific Island countries.

¹ "Fiji: Some Background Information," Wellington: New Zealand Parliamentary Library, May 25, 2000; Robert Frank, "Out on a Limb: Fiji Mahogany Fuels Latest Resource Battle in Troubled Region," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2000. Prior to the political crisis, the government had forecast economic growth of 4% for 2000.

² U.S. Department of State, "1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Fiji," February 25, 2000; U.S. Department of State, "Background Notes: Fiji," May 1996.

Ethnic Tensions. Ethnic tensions have played a major role in Fiji in the two coups of 1987 and the political crisis of 2000. The two dominant ethnic groups are indigenous Fijians, who constitute 51% of the population, and Indo-Fijians, who make up 44%. Fijians of Indian ancestry, brought by the British in the late 19th century to work in the sugar cane plantations, were the majority group until the late 1980s. After the 1987 coups, an estimated 70,000 Indo-Fijians emigrated to escape ethnic tensions. Indians control much of the republic's wealth; they dominate the sugar industry and are prominent in business, the professions, and the government bureaucracy. Indigenous Fijians control 84% of the nation's land and command the military establishment.

The 1987 Coups. In 1987, the multi-ethnic Alliance Party, which had ruled Fiji under the leadership of Ratu Sir Kamises Mara since 1970, lost to a Labor Party coalition. The new government was heavily supported by ethnic Indians and appointed a cabinet with a majority of Indian ministers. Major General Sitivini Rabuka helped lead two coups to restore the political supremacy of native Fijians.

Following the coups of 1987, Rabuka served under two interim civilian governments (1988-1989 and 1990-1991). He became leader of the indigenous Fijian Political Party (SVT) and was elected Prime Minister in 1992, a position that he held until 1999. In 1990, he backed constitutional revisions that established ethnicity-based seats in Parliament, allotted more seats to Fijians than Indians, and barred Indo-Fijians from becoming Prime Minister. However, in 1997, relenting to foreign diplomatic pressures and confident of his hold on power, Rabuka consented to a new Constitution that raised the number of Indian-held seats, added open or non-ethnicity-based positions, and allowed Indo-Fijians to become Prime Minister.

The 1999 Elections. General elections described as "peaceful and democratic" were held in May 1999. A multi-ethnic coalition of five political parties (the People's Coalition) garnered a two-thirds majority and defeated the ruling SVT party. Mahendra Chaudhry, the head of the Labor Party, became Fiji's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister. Ratu Mara remained as President.³ Although the SVT had received 38% of the vote, because of Fiji's electoral rules, it kept only 8% of the seats in the lower house. Chaudhry, an ardent trade unionist, ran on a platform of reducing poverty through social expenditures and economic development. The new Prime Minister downplayed ethnic divisions and appointed a multi-ethnic cabinet.⁴

Issues and Tensions Leading up to the Coup Attempt

Fijian Land Rights. Most cultivated rural land in Fiji is owned by native Fijian clans but leased to Indian sugar cane farmers. Because Indo-Fijians are comparatively wealthy, many indigenous Fijians view their inviolable rights to the land as their main leverage against Indian economic power. Most of the long-term land leases were due to expire in

³ Mara was elected President in 1993. Under Fiji's political system, the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), an assembly of 71 indigenous tribal leaders, selects the President, who appoints the Prime Minister. The GCC's ability to form a consensus or act in concert have reportedly been waning.

⁴ Aya Kasasa, "Country Report: Fiji," *The ACP-EU Courier*, February-March 2000.

2000-2002. Despite repeated assurances by Chaudhry that their interests would be protected, many native Fijians feared that the government would impose lease terms that were too long at prices that were too low. Furthermore, they resented the government's financial assistance to Indians whose leases were not being renewed.⁵

Chaudhry's Leadership Style. Despite proposing populist economic policies,⁶ Mehendra Chaudhry's leadership style raised the ire of opposition groups and even members of his own coalition. His opponents characterized him as arrogant, confrontational, and condescending to critics. Furthermore, the Prime Minister feuded with the press over unflattering news coverage. Shortly before the political crisis erupted, an indigenous Fijian activist warned that Chaudhry was "inviting a coup." His Labor Party was reportedly taking steps to replace him with an indigenous Prime Minister.⁷

Inter-Fijian Rivalries. Many analysts argue that the coup attempt, while ostensibly carried out for indigenous rights, was also a product of conflicts between western and eastern confederacies of indigenous Fijians, rich and poor, and urban and rural interests. Speight and many of his supporters are from the Kubuna confederacy or are poor and uneducated. By contrast, President Mara is a Fijian nobleman from the relatively wealthy Tovata confederacy. Some members of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), the body of tribal elders that elects the President, reportedly supported Speight and hoped to end the long reign of President Mara and his European and Indo-Fijian political and business allies.⁸

Protest Marches. In April-May 2000, the Taukei Movement, a nationalist organization that had staged demonstrations against the elected Labor government in 1987, organized three marches demanding the removal of the Chaudhry government. One of them reportedly involved several thousand protestors. Their grievances included the perceived government encroachment on the prerogatives of the GCC, feared reduction of land ownership rights, and laying off of native Fijians from civil service posts.⁹ However, according to some analysts, indigenous Fijians in the capital city of Suva had little sympathy for the coup; many other Fijians, while agreeing with some of Speight's professed nationalist sentiments, did not support his methods.¹⁰

⁵ See Gerard A. Finin and Terence A. Wesley-Smith, "Coups, Conflicts, and Crises: The New Pacific Way?" *Pacific Islands Development Series* (East-West Center), No. 13 (June 2000), p. 14. The new interim civilian government has cut financial assistance to Indian cane growers who have lost leases.

⁶ *Fijilive* [<http://www.fijilive.com/>], May 24, 2000, BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, May 24, 2000.

⁷ "No New Coup Says Fiji Military," *Pacific Islands Report*, [<http://pidp.ewc.hawaii.edu/PIRreport>], April 10, 2000; "Fiji Government Was Ready to Oust Chaudhry," *Pacific Islands Report*, August 22, 2000.

⁸ Seth Robson, "What Price Indigenous Supremacy in Fiji?" *The Press* (Christchurch), May 29, 2000; Finin and Wesley-Smith, op. cit., p. 8; Teresia Teaiwa, "Nation Deeply Divided," *The Press* (Christchurch), May 24, 2000.

⁹ "Fiji's Taukei Movement Revived, Plans Protests," *Pacific Islands Report*, April 5, 2000.

¹⁰ Remarks by the former U.S. ambassador to Fiji, William Bodde, Jr., June 26, 2000; "Mr. Speight Gets His Way but Fiji's Ethnic Balance Must Be Restored," *The Guardian*, May 31, 2000.

George Speight. George Speight, an insurance salesman, did not enter the political fray until the late 1990s. His Fijian-European ancestry, American and Australian university degrees, and lack of fluency in Fijian would seem to make him an unlikely candidate for indigenous Fijian leadership. However, Speight's business interests had clashed with those of the Chaudhry government and propelled him to the side of Fijian nationalists. In 1998, the Rabuka government had hired Speight to manage Fiji's fledgling timber industry. When Chaudhry came to power, he not only dismissed many government officials, including Speight, but also rejected a contract with an American timber company with whom Speight was associated. The company, Total Resource Management, had been working with Speight and Fijian landowners since 1996. The Fijian landowners charged Chaudhry with favoring a British company in order to curry favor with the European Union, which buys Fijian sugar produced by Indian cane growers.¹¹

The Military. Although little detailed information is yet available about the military's role in the hostage-taking and attempted coup, reports indicate that "rogue elements" of the Fiji Army, some members of the Fiji Special Forces, and former Fijian members of the British Special Air Service (SAS) supported Speight. They were backed by some officers of the Suva police force and groups of villagers armed with primitive weapons. The Fiji Military Forces (FMF) chief, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, was in Norway when Speight and others stormed the Parliament building on May 19, 2000. Upon the Commodore's return, he quickly assumed the task of restoring order. Some analysts suggest that Bainimarama and many other military and political leaders opposed Speight's leadership and methods but supported some of his demands.¹²

Chronology of the Attempted Coup

- ! **May 19, 2000:** Armed insurgents take Prime Minister Chaudhry and 30 government officials hostage.¹³ Army defectors and civilians join the occupation of the parliament building. The rebels demand the abrogation of the 1997 constitution.¹⁴ Riots in Suva result in \$14 million in damages to 160 Indian-owned shops. One policeman is killed.
- ! **May 25-June 2, 2000:** President Mara steps down following Speight's demands that he resign. The Fijian military imposes martial law and begins negotiations with Speight. Commodore Frank Bainimarama becomes acting government head. The military government and the

¹¹ Under the Lome Convention, EU countries purchase Fijian sugar at above-market rates. See also Joseph Kahn, "Business Interests Lurked Behind Fiji's Haphazard Coup," *New York Times*, September 13, 2000, p. 1.

¹² Seth Robson, "Gun Held to PM's Head," *Dominion* (Wellington), May 23, 2000; "Military Had Planned Coup," *Fijilive*, September 18, 2000; State Department official.

¹³ The hostages included President Mara's daughter, Transport and Tourism Minister Adi Koila.

¹⁴ According to reports, many tribal leaders and SVT MP's opposed the 1997 Constitution.

rebels ask the Great Council of Chiefs to arbitrate. Former Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka reportedly becomes a key military adviser.¹⁵

- ! **May 30, 2000:** Bainimarama revokes the multi-racial constitution of 1997 and annuls the 1999 election of Chaudhry.

- ! **June 23-26, 2000:** Speight and military leaders reach an agreement on the new civilian President, former Vice-President Ratu Josefa Iloilo. The agreement then collapses over procedures for electing the President and the choice of Prime Minister; Speight releases four hostages.

- ! **July 4-6, 2000:** The military unilaterally names banking executive and former senator Laisenia Qarase as interim Prime Minister and seals off Parliament. Speight supporters sabotage the electrical supply in Suva.

- ! **July 14, 2000:** Speight releases the remaining hostages in return for amnesty and a role in choosing the interim civilian government.

- ! **July 15, 2000:** The GCC formally elects Ratu Josefa Iloilo as President and Ratu Jope Seniloli as Vice-President. President Iloilo formally names Laisenia Qarase as Prime Minister. There are no Indians in the new government.

- ! **July 20-23, 2000:** Speight rejects the choice of Qarase as Prime Minister and nominates Bau chief Adi Samanunu Talakuli Cakobau.¹⁶ He calls on South Pacific peoples to disrupt the Sydney Olympic Games in support of indigenous rights.

- ! **July 26-27, 2000:** The Fiji military arrests Speight and 369 supporters, claiming; one rebel is killed and 32 are wounded.

Aftermath of the Coup Attempt

Timetable for New Elections. The interim civilian government has promised to promulgate a new Constitution by September 2001 and hold national elections by March 2002. The government has expressed intent to restrict the positions of Prime Minister and President to ethnic Fijians.

Other Legal, Political, and Military Developments. On October 11, 2000, Fiji's High Court formally charged George Speight with treason. On November 16, 2000, the High Court found the formation of the interim civilian government and abrogation of the

¹⁵ Sitiveni Rabuka, Chairman of the GCC, favored a return to indigenous Fijian rule but denied involvement in the attempted coup. *Fijilive*, June 15, 2000, FBIS, June 15, 2000; "Fiji's Rabuka Tells How He Refused Coup Invitation," *Daily Post*, September 16, 2000.

¹⁶ Bau is located in the Kubuna confederacy.

1997 Constitution illegal and called for the return of the Chaudhry government.¹⁷ The Qarase government plans to appeal the ruling in February 2001. On November 2, 2000, 39 soldiers, members of an elite unit loyal to George Speight, took over the main military barracks outside Suva. Three regular soldiers and five rebel soldiers were killed before the mutiny was subdued by the Fiji Army.¹⁸

Social and Economic Disturbances. In August 2000, an indigenous Fijian soldier and an ethnic Indian policeman died in clashes with Speight supporters who had set fire to Indian properties in Sigatoka, 120 miles east of Suva. Army troops killed one rebel and arrested 37 others on the northern island of Vanua Levu. Most analysts agree that the political crisis inflicted serious short-term damage to Fiji's economy. The sugar and garment industries suffered some disruption due to strikes and demonstrations by Fijian sugar cane workers and trade unions and boycotts by Australian and New Zealand dock workers and labor organizations in opposition to the coup attempt. In September 2000, a government survey reported that at least 7,536 people had lost their jobs as a direct result of the political crisis: Workers in the tourism industry – the number of tourists is projected to drop by 33% in 2000 – were the most seriously affected.¹⁹ The Reserve Bank of Fiji predicted that in 2000, the economy would contract by 13%. Foreign investment is also expected to fall.²⁰

International Responses. The U.S. government has called for the reinstatement of the 1997 Constitution, which upholds Indo-Fijian political rights,²¹ and has halted about \$1 million in annual foreign assistance.²² The Congressional Human Rights Caucus and several individual Members of Congress have expressed dismay about violations of political rights in Fiji.²³ The European Union is considering suspending Fiji from the Lome Convention, which subsidizes Fijian sugar exports. In October 2000, Australia allowed its preferential treatment of garment imports from Fiji to lapse but promised to renew special trade privileges if democracy was restored within 18 months. The United States, Australia, and other countries have issued travel advisories to Fiji. New Zealand has issued emergency visas to Indo-Fijians escaping the political turmoil and has reportedly barred visits by members of the interim civilian government.²⁴ The Commonwealth has “partially” suspended Fiji from the organization.

¹⁷ Following his release, former Prime Minister Chaudhry embarked on a world tour in which he campaigned for the restoration of democracy in Fiji. He returned to Fiji on October 18, 2000.

¹⁸ Military officials have reportedly placed former prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka under investigation for alleged involvement in the mutiny. *Pacific Islands Report*, November 6, 2000.

¹⁹ *Pacific Islands Report*, September 6, 2000; *Pacific Islands Report*, November 13, 2000.

²⁰ “Government Announces Economic Reforms,” *South China Morning Post*, August 17, 2000; Dr. Wali M. Osman, “An Update on Fiji,” *Bank of Hawaii*, October 2000.

²¹ On September 10, 2000, the American Embassy in Suva issued a statement declaring that “changes to the 1997 Constitution should come from the people of Fiji through their elected representatives as provided within the framework of the Constitution.”

²² Mostly Enhanced International Peacekeeping Capabilities (EIPC) and International Military Education and Training (IMET) funds.

²³ See “The Situation in Fiji,” *Congressional Record*, July 25, 2000, p. S7528.

²⁴ “Visit Blocked,” *Waikato Times* (Hamilton, NZ), November 15, 2000.

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