

The Role of the Military in Fiji

Jone Baledroka,

Fiji Update 2009, Stamford Plaza Hotel, Brisbane.

13 Aug 2009.

The role of Fiji's military has changed substantially over the last decade – in the mid-1990s, there was an emphasis on professionalism and meritocracy, and an effort to steer the armed forces away from the 1987 engagement in politics (which was viewed as having had a negative impact both on the nation and on the military itself). Since the 2000 coup, the military has emerged again at the centre of Fiji politics, most forcefully since the December 2006 coup, justifying this by a claim to be tackling corruption, racism and bad governance. However, it is important to judge Commodore Bainimarama – the coup leader and so called nation builder by his actions rather than be swayed by his discernible shifting rhetoric.

Since the April 10th abrogation of Fiji's constitution, the role of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces has now reached another new level of military intervention in politics. A new legal order has been decreed, the media censored and it is almost certain that Bainimarama or a former commander of the military will be announced President in the coming days. To reiterate what Stephanie Lawson said about the 1987 coup “the praetorian character of this development does indeed suggest that the military in Fiji has become a *homo politicus* in its own right.” The controversial People's Charter that was put together by a National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF) in August of last year called for the realigning of the military's role to include ‘Human Security’. Bad faith and deception can only be inferred on the part of Bainimarama and the military through the misconstruing of this concept. It is now clear Bainimarama and the military intend to run the political affairs of the state at least now till 2014. I would posit that he is there for life.

The Fiji Military, once viewed as the agent of Fijian political paramountcy, has now become its nemesis – core Fijian institutions and collective organisations have been destroyed or diminished – the Great Council of Chiefs, the public sector unions, the Law Society, the Media, the Methodist Church. It is as if Fiji society were being hollowed out to make way for the modernist state Bainimarama purports to be manufacturing for Fiji. Unfortunately the continued flight of intellectual and skilled human capital from Fiji of both Indo and Indigenous Fijians bares such a piped dream. The support by the Police and Military allows Bainimarama unbridled power. Bainimarama and the military are applying a dictum often attributed to a former Latin American dictator: “For my friends, everything . . . for my enemies, the law.” The recent arresting and charging of Methodist Church Ministers and a high chief confirms such a pitiful state of affairs where laws are invoked to penalize opponents of the regime.

The events of the present are being justified by a revisionist historical interpretation of Fiji’s 2000 Coup events. According to this view, the RFMF was a saviour of Fiji in 2000, when it stepped in to crush George Speight’s coup. What is forgotten is that (1) the RFMF was deeply uncertain about how to respond to the May 19th 2000 coup, and some senior officers were implicated in plots to unseat Chaudhry; (2) for some time after the coup, there was uncertainty about which side to take; (3) Bainimarama consistently justified his own abrogation of the constitution on May 29th 2000 - not (as some suggested) under duress due to Speight’s holding of hostages, but also much later, after the release of the hostages, in affidavits submitted at the time of the February 2001 Chandrika Prasad court hearings. In fact from May 29th to July 4th 2000 for some 37 days, Bainimarama had his first taste of power as head of government.

Within the RFMF, that mythical account of the 2000 intervention is being used to build solidarity in the rank-and-file, and to give Bainimarama popularity within the military. In addressing the Military’s Infantry Day Parade on the 23 Jun this year, Commodore Bainimarama said that the death of loyal soldiers during the 2000 mutiny at the Queen Elizabeth Barracks, Suva led to the event of December 5, 2006. The revelation was made by the Commander speaking in Fijian saying “*Na nodratou mai leqa na tacida oqo e sega ni va ka waletaki (the death of our brothers (2000 mutiny) shall not be in vain).*”

Commodore Bainimarama said the death of the soldiers brought about many changes in the nation.

Again in his speech at the joint Passing Out Parade of 640 new soldier and police recruits, Albert Park, Suva, on Fri 26 Jun 2009, Bainimarama said, “The divide and rule policies espoused in the last 20 years has plagued us as a nation. Our objectives in the events of December 2006, was to arrest this trend once and for all. There are many obstacles in our path. Do not allow yourselves to be easily manipulated by external pressures and influences around you. Be just, be firm and steadfast”. Indeed, stirring rhetoric aimed at but two perceived threats-international intervention and ethno-nationalists.

The threat of ethno nationalism as demonized through the SDL and other nationalist parties has been overplayed by Bainimarama and the military. It is not a justification for the military’s high guardian role which since 2006 has increasingly burdened the tax payers with massive budget blowouts. More over in this modern age, Constructivist theory of ethnicity show that ethnic suppression in any form only exacerbates the polarization of a society.

In fact, in 2000, it was the Military executive council headed by Bainimarama that co-opted Laisenia Qarase into the council and requested him to begin formulating an Indigenous Affirmative action plan as per the compact of the 1997 Constitution. This was the first strategy adopted by the military to appease George Speight and his followers in attempting to secure the release of the Coalition government hostages. Qarase then a senator was part of the Senate Committee on Indigenous Fijians in Business as mandated by the Chaudrhy government in 1999. Given his professional background, he had first hand knowledge from the senate committee submissions. The manipulation of ethno-nationalism as an inward destructive agent of indigenous instrumentalism by the military is ongoing. As seen in its truth and justice campaign prior to the elections in 2006 a smear campaign by the illegal regime is now orchestrated using the heavily censored mass media. The same baseless and biased rhetoric vociferously used to oppose the Qoliqoli (seashore customary rights) bills and the Reconciliation Truth and Unity Bills of the first SDL governments is now used to harpoon past and today’s Fijian leadership as racists and dismantle arbitrarily their institutions. It is as if the sum total of Crown and Fijian chiefly

rule has failed Fiji quite contrary to the legacy of Lord Stanmore and native colonial administrators such as Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi. All for a created 'multi-racial new legal order' as if the phrase will inspire local and international acceptance and breathe life into what Professor Wadan Narsey describes as a morally gutted nation. Incidentally this new multi-racialism to be brought about by electoral reform by 2014 is - rather oddly - to be achieved and imposed under the watchful eye of a ninety nine percent indigenous military force. Even more perplexing is how the Military elite still regales itself of its bygone international peacekeeping reputation now tarnished by its installed regime's abuse of human rights and the rule of law.

For the future, what is unclear is whether there is credible commitment from within the rank and file of the military, to see this praetorian role continue, given mounting internal pressure brought about by ethnic empathy, increasing poverty levels, the poor state of the economy and international isolation. Indeed the weight of plain social, economic and political reality will unravel the regime and its empty rhetoric.