CHAPTER V
THE 1987 COUP D' ETAT AND POLITICS IN FIJI
The events leading to 1987 coup d' etat in Fiji were shocking and disturbing. At ten o'clock on the morning of Thursday 14 May 1987, after only one in power, the democratically-elected government of Fiji was overthrown in a coup d'etat conducted by the third-in-command of the Royal Fiji Military Forces, Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka.

The morning session of Fiji's House of Representatives had, until then, been quiet enough. Fijian Alliance Party MP Taniela Veitata had been venting his frustration at the defeat in the April elections of his party's government by the Labour/National Federation Party Coalition. He was addressing the newly elected members of parliament by saying that "Our chiefs are really the guardians of peace in Fiji...Mao said that political power comes out of the barrel of a gun. In Fiji, there is no gun. But our chiefs are there, we respect them". Other races, though, had given the Alliance - the party of the chiefs and by implication of all indigenous Fijians - "a kick in our faces." Fiji belongs to the Fijians in the same way.... India belongs to the Indians.

Veitata was interrupted by the entrance of ten masked soldiers, one of whom yelled, "Sit down everybody....Ladies and gentlemen, this is a military takeover. We apologise for any inconvenience caused....Stay cool, stay down and listen what we are going to tell you.

Rabuka, dressed in a suit, had been watching from the public gallery. He stood up, walked over to the Coalition's Fijian leader, Timoci Bavadra, and said, "Mr. Prime Minister, please lead your team down the right".

Bavadra looked around at his stunned colleagues, and at the "immobile faces of the Alliance Opposition seated across the chamber".

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3 Ibid.
4 Captain Israeli Dugu. quoted in Robie. n.1. p.218.
5 Robie, n. 1. p.218.

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“Very well,” he replied, “Under protest. Come along, gentlemen. Let us comply in a dignified and correct manner.” He and his fellow government MPs were led outside at gunpoint and ordered into two waiting military trucks. As they moved off, Bavadra turned to Education Minister Tupeni Baba, another Fijian member of the Labour Party, and asked: “Is this really happening? A coup d’état in Fiji?”

The news shocked a world grown blase about military takeovers. Rabuka’s bloodless coup was more than the first in the Pacific: it had occurred in a country whose smooth transition to democratic self-rule had been help up as a model for the Third World. Australia and New Zealand expressed particular alarm. Fiji was the crossroads of a region in which they considered themselves to play a leading role. Hurriedly-written analyses headlined “Paradise Lost” and “Trouble in Paradise” appeared in major newspapers and magazines of the two countries. Television stations matched stock film with spoken reports from a handful of correspondents. Over the next few weeks the media patched together an explanation for Rabuka’s actions.

The coup, most decided, was the result of longstanding racial tensions between indigenous Fijians and “immigrant” Indians; Rabuka had acted on behalf of his race. The print media ran potted histories of the Indian presence in Fiji and described the Labour/NFP Coalition government as “Indian dominated.” Subsequent events were interpreted with race in mind; demonstrations staged by the militant “Taukei Movement” were taken as signs of “Fijian unrest,” Rabuka’s second military intervention in September 1987 was seen to be staged in response to a comeback by the “Indian” Coalition; an illegal arms shipment was seen as a sign of imminent Indian revolt; and the most notable feature of the new constitution promulgated in July 1990 was considered to be its creation of a parliament biased against Indians.
A campaign of harassment aimed mostly at Indians and conducted mainly by the military and the Taukei Movement has reinforced this picture. Arson, looting, and riots were all initially involved in this campaign, and formed part of a crime rate which more than doubled in the months after May 1987. On 15 October 1989, in a coordinated effort by a Methodist youth group, four Indian temples in Lautoka were firebombed, prompting a 24-hour strike by Fiji’s Indian community.

The forces of “law and order” have been equally at fault. In one bizarre incident at a supermarket on 17 July 1987, a senior police official’s wife complained of discrimination when given a smaller plastic carrying bag than other shoppers. Police quickly arrived and attempted to arrest the entire staff, eventually making do with the overnight detention of three cashiers. Reports continue, long after the coup, of arbitrary arrests, beatings, and intimidation. As recently as 24 October 1990, an Indian university lecturer was kidnapped and tortured for taking part in a public demonstration at which copies of the 1990 Constitution were burned. Five soldiers were charged with the assault and pleaded guilty.

Most in the media continue to see in these events the signs of long-standing racial antagonism. Others see more complicated causes. Certain aspects of the coup and subsequent events have prompted some observers, both in academia and elsewhere, to search beyond race for more effective explanations. Suspicious were first aroused when, the day after the coup, Ratu Sit Kamisese Mara, Prime Minister of Fiji from independence in 1970 until his defeat by the Coalition in 1987, joined Rabuka’s Council of Ministers, a body dominated by Taukei Movement members. This prompted speculations that the coup was the result of an
Alliance plot. That Rabuka quickly yielded power to civilians, rather than maintaining personal control, reinforced the belief that he was acting on behalf of more powerful political players.

Certainly, events went remarkably smoothly for Rabuka. Initial problems, which arose when the Governor-General, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, condemned the coup and refused to swear in Rabuka's Council, were more or less resolved within a week. By then Ganilau had dismissed the released Bavadra government, dissolved Parliament, granted amnesty from prosecution to Rabuka and his men, and sworn in a Council of Advisors almost all of whom met with Rabuka's approval. Since then, most of the domestic obstacles faced by Fiji's various military-backed governments have been overcome. The destruction of democracy in what is now the "Sovereign Democratic Republic of Fiji" seems complete.

INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS

The reactions of foreign governments to the coup reflected their own understanding of the Fiji situation and in particular the reasons and causes behind it. It is interesting to have a critical account of the responses of foreign government, and the factors influencing their reaction.

As soon as the coup occurred, the New Zealand Prime Minister, Lange was advised of the situation and the information forwarded the Hawke in Canberra and Shridath Ramphal, the Commonwealth General Secretary, in London. Large immediately established a special group of foreign affairs specialists to monitor telex reports from Suva.  

Sh. Lange ruled out military intervention. "One thing worse a Fijian would contemplate than martial law", he told journalists, "is New Zealand law". However, other military initiatives remained open. Once the New Zealand government received Bavadra's plea for assistance,
contact was made with Nailatikau in Canberra and the repartition of two Fiji battalions in the Middle East investigated”. On the basis of a loyalty test, the Brigadier has the potential to be in command of troops which outweigh the number of troops in Fiji,” Sh. Lange declared. “There is some evidence from the postal balloting which took place in the recent General Election that in fact those soldiers who are in the Middle (70 per cent) supported the coalition”.

The Prime Minister Lange stressed this kind of Military Solution Publicly. A New Zealand frigate lay in Suva harbour, and the SAS and Ready Reaction Forces were on alert. The media image of preparedness deviated somewhat from reality. Lange anticipated their use only if the High Commission in Suva was threatened, if mob violence got out of hand, if New Zealand citizens were taken hostage, or if Ganilau and Bavadra were in mortal danger. In any case Nailatikau had no wish to provoke civil war be entering Fiji at the head, of an invading army. The military posture accompanied bitter attacks on Mara and Stinson for their willingness to support the coup.17

GREAT BRITAIN’S NEUTRALITY

Military coups in Commonwealth countries are usually a great problem for Great Britain. It is usually a cause of queen’s dilemma of being the constitutional head of these countries, a responsibility without power. However, Fiji appeared to have been the exception to the rule. Here Queen had been able to exert pressure and exercise influence of much greater scale because of the considerable reverence British monarchy enjoy from the Fijian chiefs and tribal community.

When Lt. Col. Rebuka launched his coup, the first thing he tried was to attain the approval of the Queen. At first it seemed that he might succeed, for Sir Penaia Ganilau did swear in him as Chairman of the Council of Ministers. But soon afterwards Governor-General announced that he had been advised by the Chief Justice that this was illegal and

17 Robertson, n.10, p.89.
refused to swear in Rabuka's other nominees as ministers. Then came a personal message of encouragement to Sir Penaia Ganilau from the queen for his stand and his actions as custodian of the constitution. During the impasse that followed, Col. Rabuka threatened to turn Fiji into a republic and the Great Council of Fijian Chiefs approved the idea.

Later on Ratu Ganilau appointed a ten member council of ministers, which was an amalgamation of the military regime's ministers. Ultimately after 25th September's second coup the linkage with Great Britain was severed.

NEIGHBOURING PERCEPTION

In the wide expanse of the South Pacific, New Zealand and Australia are in the role of front-line states,\(^1\) their ties with Fiji and paternalistic interest in the South Pacific dating back to the time when they were the only regional countries within the British Empire under self-government. Despite discomforts in the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and United States) relationship, New Zealand in particular has established itself as the intelligence source and agent for the West in the South pacific, and it has been an important transmitter of information of post-coup events in Fiji for the region's major Power, viz., the United States.\(^2\) Unlike Australia, with its Southeast Asian neighbours in the near north, and its trade and security interests in the Indian Ocean, New Zealand has found an identity as a purely South Pacific Country, with a unique role in its own perception – deriving from the racial affinity of its indigenous Maori people to the other polynesian peoples of the pacific. Also, in spite of its modest endowment by international economic and political standards, it is a country of influence and affluence in the region. For New Zealand, the issue in Fiji was a South Pacific one in which it was cast in a leading role. On affairs in its own region, it was an advice giver, not an advice-receiver. Other countries recognized its right


\(^2\) Statement by Sir Wallace Rowling at a Public meeting, Dunedin, 28 April 1988.
to be an advice giver. Immediately after the coup, New Zealand seemed briefly to be teetering on the brink of a neocolonial intervention. The coercive diplomacy characteristic of the empire has, however, been replaced by the responsive diplomacy of the post-colonial era. When news of the coup first reached Wellington, along with the advice that the coup leader intended to hold a conference to explain his move, the Government of New Zealand instructed its High Commissioner to attend no meeting other than the one convened by the Governor-General. From the start it acted on the assumption that even in the absence of his Ministers, the Governor-General constituted a constitutional authority; and having once put its faith in the Governor-General it never wavered thereafter.

New Zealand moved into a two fold position. It held (a) that non-recognition of an illegal regime could coexist with continued dealings with that regime through the fiction of dealing only with the Governor-General; and (b) that if the Governor-General was a constitutional authority in the post-coup period, the offices of Prime Minister and Ministers of the Crown, which he had declared vacant, must be regarded as vacant, by its adherence to such an expansive view of the role of the Governor-General and to such a qualified view of the rights of a parliamentary majority, it accepted in effect that if, supported by armed force, a Governor-General should dismiss Parliament and the elected Government and proclaim that he now personally exercised executive power, then a Constitutional authority continued to function - unless of course courts were permitted to declare otherwise.20

For the Labour Party Government of Australia too both legalism and realism pointed to accepting that the Governor-General of Fiji was its former and legitimate ruler. For better or for worse, outside countries had to maintain links with whatever regime was in power in Suva. Strident criticism would achieve nothing constructive. It could only

imperial future relations. Cautions diplomacy could on the other hand ameliorate the effects of military rule and perhaps, eventually, guide the country back towards some form of parliamentary democracy.

Constitutional monarchy in Fiji was detached from constitutional democracy, and constitutional monarchists outside Fiji upheld that detachment as being within the powers of the Governor-General. As long as Sir Penaia Ganilau retained his Governor-Generalship, New Zealand and Australia would follow a strategy of appeasement. That is, they would accept things as they were, for the time being at least - for fear of worse. It was with murmurs of approval from New Zealand in particular that the Governor-General of Fiji saved his own office by renouncing overthrown democracy, and the subsequent endorsement by the Queen received the explicit public support of the Government of New Zealand.

Nevertheless, following the coup in May 1987, Australia and New Zealand decided not to extend aid to Fiji or to allow tourists (de facto) to that country. Their trade unions imposed a ban on trade with Fiji. Rabuka had his professional military training not only in Australia and India, but it was something of an embarrassment that he had received much of his military training in New Zealand. After the coup New Zealand which had traditionally trained most of Fiji's officers, terminated a training course that had been organised for fourteen Fijians. Prime Minister Bob Hawke of Australia, in a formal news release on 21 May 1987, stated that: "given the delicately balanced communal relationships in Fiji, the protection and preservation into the future of...

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21 Even though elections had just been held in April and produced a clear verdict, Prime Minister Bob Hawke declared on 26 May 1987 that: "if there were a new election in Fiji on the basis of the existing constitution... that would be acceptable to this Government". Australian Foreign Affairs Record (Canberra), May 1987, p. 270.

22 Rabuka attended the Indian Defence Services Staff College at Wellington, Tamil Nadu, in 1979 and wrote a thesis on the role of the military in the countries of the Third World as an interventionist force in a post-coup period. (Dean and Ritona). The year in India demonstrated to Rabuka the close military links between India and the USSR. The fear of Russian and the Libyan influence percolating into Fiji under the coalition Government was apparently another motive behind the coup. Later Rabuka attended the Australian Joint Services' Staff College in Canberra.

23 Some of the Sixty hand-picked men trained for the coup had also received training at the New Zealand Special Air Services (SAS) Unit. Ibid. p. 42.
democratic process is indispensable to all the people of Fiji." The Government of Australia announced a freeze on all new aid activities and suspension of a range of defence cooperation activities, such as the training of Fijian defence personnel in Australia. It had considered imposition of more stringent sanctions on Fiji as Acting Foreign Minister Gareth Evans explained in parliament on 26th May 1987, but had decided against it from a feeling that they would not be effective and could hurt the wrong groups of Fijians. After the first coup it decided not to initiate any new aid projects and, after the second, suspended even the existing aid. It recalled its defense cooperation advisers in Fiji, put on hold in May, in September; it also recalled its high Commissioner for consultations in October.

INDIAN RESPONSE

In May 1987 the crisis in Sri Lanka was more immediate and more urgent than the affairs of Fiji. Nevertheless India did, inevitably, take up the cause of the Fiji Indians. After the coup, the Government of India expressed its hope that parliamentary democracy would be restored, that the Constitution of 1970 would not be changed unilaterally, that racial discrimination would not be introduced, and that racial harmony would be preserved. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi noted that the Constitution of 1970 had been drawn up "after protracted discussions among the political and ethnic groups in Fiji and with Britain" and that it was central to the maintenance of stability and racial harmony in Fiji." Denying the charge from the Taukei movement that India was interfering in Fiji's internal affairs, the Indian High Commissioner in Suva, T.P. Sreenivasan, insisted that these were "the concerns of a fellow Commonwealth country dedicated to the principles of democracy and racial harmony."24

Senior Indian diplomats believe that perhaps "India should have pushed much harder" from the beginning.25 But it was not easy for India

25 Ibid.
to decide upon the right mix of statements that would exert diplomatic pressure without appearing to interfere in another country's sovereign affairs and without being simultaneously cornered into a position of considering military intervention of risking public international humiliation. Rabuka and his cohorts would have interpreted any active exertion by India on behalf of the Fiji Indians as proof that the Fiji Indians were Indians, not Fijians. India argued that opposition to the overthrow of democracy and racial discrimination should be a matter of principled concern to all countries. Suppression and denial of legitimate rights were the seeds of disturbance and unrest, not peace and stability. Sending troops was out of the question, as much by virtue of principle as because of logistics. India, however, suspended trade and technical cooperation with Fiji and recalled its High Commissioner in Suva for consultations. It of course lacked any levers with which to move Rabuka's Fiji. It approached Australia and New Zealand precisely because it viewed them as possessing the most leverage. Yet even an Indian commentator questioned the wisdom of India seeking to join the former colonial Power, Britain, and the South Pacific's neocolonial Powers. Australia and New Zealand, in some sort of concerted measures against the coup in Fiji.26

Australia and New Zealand lacked the means to mount a decisive military intervention immediately after the coup. Had India had the advantage of proximity, it is difficult to believe that it would not have intervened. Nevertheless it is easy to underestimate India's influence and diplomatic weight in international forums such as the Commonwealth and the United Nations.27 Jawaharlal Nehru was the principal architect of the Commonwealth as a multiracial association, and the voice of the world's largest democracy in that forum has always been listened to with

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27 Indeed one relatively recent Canadian study rated India's influence at the United Nations as next only to that of the two Super Powers. This meant that it was greater than that of Britain, China and France. (Peyton V. Lyon, "Canada at the United Nations." International Perspectives, Ottawa, Ont, September-October 1985, p. 16).
respect. The new Fijian regime was overtly racist, and the victims of that racism were Indians. Yet India had little influence on the Commonwealth responses to the coup. India, a country outside the region, and sensitive to anti-Indian racism, was not one whose message would be sought out or especially appreciated.

**The South Pacific Forum Stand**

The reaction of South Pacific Forum members, the small island countries of South-West Pacific had been lukewarm and reserved. Only Vanuatu's Walter Lini denounced the coup in strongest terms. Other South Pacific Forum (SPF) leaders reacted to the spectre of foreign intervention. PNG's foreign minister Ted Diro declared political developments in Fiji "a matter for the people of Fiji to resolve for themselves." Deputy opposition leader Father John Mamis condemned his response as cowardly and inadequate. Certainly it encouraged Rabuka to consider that the weight of Pacific island opinion was behind him. He was probably correct. When Melanesian leaders met Rabuka on 21 May, they urged Australia and New Zealand not to succumb to reckless military adventurism, Vanuatu, still angered at Australia's paranoia over Libya, declared Australian neocolonialism the gravest threat to regional security and accused the two metropolitan powers of bias towards Western interests.

One week after the coup the Western Samoan government demanded "sympathy for the agony of the Fiji people grappling with a fundamental problem in their society." It did not specify the problem as either the racial divide or political greed but concluded that "the wisdom and tolerance shown by the traditional leadership would stand Fiji in

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28 Rabuka denies the charge of racism. In his view there is a commercial need for the Indians in Fiji. Only they must accept being out of political power. He would also like them to convert to Christianity. At present they are "heathens". Nor can he tell with the Indians "if they're lying or not." Dean and Ritova, pp. 120-1, 123 and 125.
29 Australian, 16 May 1987.
good stead". On the same day Fiji's council of Chiefs forced Ganilau to accept the Coup's objectives.

In May 1987 SPF heads of government met in Apia for their annual gathering. Hawke asked that an Eminent persons Group be sent to Fiji to investigate and advise on the situation. Some members states regarded this as "interference" and reacted angrily when Hawke telexed Fiji. But later on Ganilau rejected the idea much to the relief of most SPF leaders. PNG's Wingti condemned Australia for helping the deposed government ministers. When Baba and Datt arrived to press for a peace keeping force and the restoration of the Bavadra government, the Forum told them they were "mere option representatives" and requested them to leave.

Popular democracy is not the norm in the region, Lange conceded, "All citizens are equal but those who came first are more equal." Lange helped to edit the Forum's statement on Fiji to meet Wingti's approval. It expressed concern at the event and stressed the need for reconciliation.

Pacific island leaders interpreted the coup only as racial conflict. They did not accept Indians as the equals of pacific islanders. In 1987 three pacific leaders had refused to attend a home convention conference in Suva when they heard that Siddiq Koya was Fiji's Prime Minister elect only when Mara became leader of a minority government did they arrive. Ten years later attitudes remained the same.

INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATION OF THE COUP

Reactions of foreign governments to the coup in Fiji reflected their understanding of the Fijian situation and in particular its cause. The Fiji contradiction confounded some observers and initially produced speculation of US involvement. There were speculations from several sources.

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34 New Zealand Listener, 20 June 1987. pp. 10-11
35 R. Crocombe, "Options for the Pacific Largest Ethnic Group"
quarters that US had been involved through covert intervention by secret intelligence agency, CIA in general in the Fijian Military Coup. Before analysing the US complicity in Fijian affair it is important to discuss the US motivations and objectives in Fiji.

American interest in Fiji was not an isolated affair but accompanied by renewed pressure after a changed geo-strategic climate in the South Pacific. With a larger number of elections due in the South Pacific (Australia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Kiribati and Vanuatu) in 1987 pressure on the US was intensified. US had a growing realization that pursuit of US strategic goals was getting increasingly difficult. A new generation of pacific island leaders with more venturous ideas for charting their directions of foreign as well as domestic policies was emerging and striving to come to power. Most of them believed that US had taken more from them than it had given. They had a feeling that US had harnessed regional fisheries, benefited from the facility to its navel vessels and enjoyed their support in international forums without contributing significantly to the region’s economic development. So, US needed very badly some pre-emptive measures against this growing antipathy to its status and powers.

US had very keen interest to maintain status quo in Fiji and frustrate any radical transformations in its internal politics. The US had for years been cultivating Ratu Mara as a faithful ally, having a marked anti-Soviet foreign policy.

Fiji’s identification with the US interests was not new. A long history existed of Fiji’s Alliance Government’s close military ties with the US and its foreign policy objectives. Robert T. Robertson says:

"Problem faced by the US to disassociate itself from the coup, was the general knowledge that they were actively involved in shaping the destiny of Fiji to satisfy their geo-strategic aims."  

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Fijian foreign policy had a special pro-US bias from the very beginning. For example, even after being a member of S.P.F. it did not go to the assistance of Vanuavatu in 1980 when the US Phoenix corporation and Francy Settlers financed sessionist revolt in Santo. Nevertheless, as military ties with US increased, diqued arose as to its implications. The government had not initiated public debates on foreign policy choices and total abandonment of nonalignment.

The Alliance Party under the leadership of Mara had maintained a close secret links with US. In 1982 general election, US consultancy firm "Business International" was hired to design an electoral strategy for his party. Anti-Soviet hysteria was used for election propaganda. There were acquasations that NFP had been financed by Soviet Union and received 1 million dollars for that. US agents were alleged to have masterminded Alliance counter attacks against NFP in 1982.

In past 1980 period, Fiji and US had come closer in security understanding. Mara was given important say in US's CINPAC Headquarter's policies and was appointed to the standing committee of the Pacific Islands Development Programme (PIDP), the US version of SPF secretariat. In the same year Fiji lifted its ban on the visits of US nuclear ships.

US offered Fiji 3 million dollars per annum aid under its weapons standardization programme and eventually concluded an annual aid programme worth 2.5 million dollars. To administer the bilateral aid, an office was established under William Paupe, who was an employee of USAID and served in US as part of CIA programme. Military links of Fiji with US were consolidated through US International Military Education and Training Programme and Pacific Army Management Seminars (PAM). Col. Sitiveni Rabuka attended several of PAM seminar in Manila in 1981.

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39 Hailey, n.18.
More critically Fiji labour party had a very sound foreign policy stand, sometimes in total contrast to Alliance’s foreign policy. Dr. Bavadra had, during his campaign, asserted that he would follow a strong anti-nuclear line and establish close links with the NAM. The labour movement in Fiji was a formidable challenge to US policy goals in the South Pacific. To counter the anti-nuclear sentiments in the Pacific Trade Union Forum (PTUF), a regional consortium of left and liberal trade unions in which the Fiji labour movement was most prominent, the US started financing AAFLI (Asian - American Free Labour Institute) which had definite CIA connections. The coalition leaders during election campaign focussed on all these issues. In one very few foreign policy statements, the labour party leader Krishna Dutta declared:

“Banning all US nuclear ships display in a more concrete way Fiji’s displeasure at US actions in the South pacific - in particular US’s refusal to sign the Rarotonga Treaty and its disregards of democratic principles.”

Richard A. Herr has further illustrated that it appeared that Labour party has included within its policy platform a pledge to move Fiji out of its Western alignment. At the same time, potential was there to consolidate its ties with the Soviet Union.

THE US COMPLICITY

Most of the Western governments saw the coup as an internal affair, and either accepted without reservation the issue of Fijian paramountacy. Robuka presented or at least considered it more justifiable than alternatives which might give weight to neocolonial initiatives. In the other hand much publicity has been given to the possibility of overseas involvement in the coup to 14th May. As yet no hard evidence exists, though there is a body of well documented circumstantial evidence that the United States in particular knew of,
or acquiesced in, the possibility of an attempt to overthrow the newly elected Coalition government. In the week following the announcement of the election results, rumours were rife in Suva of U.S. efforts to destabilise the new government. The situation had deteriorated to such an extent that the American Embassy in Suva took the hitherto unprecedented step of issuing a public statement on 23 April to refute these rumours. Amongst other things the statement included a formal denial of U.S. involvement in efforts to destabilise the new government.43

These were based on the obvious American concern at the coalition’s proposals to shift rumors of Fiji away from its close ties with the United States, and move towards non-alignment. The coalition had also proposed to ban all nuclear armed and nuclear powered ships from Fijian ports. If this policy were implemented it would seriously undermine U.S. strategic interests in the South Pacific, interests which were already jeopardised by the anti-nuclear policies adopted in New Zealand.

These moves also threatened the close ties, the U.S. military had been developing with the RFMF. Fijian troops were employed on U.S. sponsored peace-keeping operations in Sinai, a series of joint training programmes had been instituted, and under the weapon standardization programme the U.S. was expected to contribute over US$ 500,000 to purchase M16 automatic rifles and other weaponry. A team of U.S. navy planners had visited Fiji in 1986 to assess the possibilities of establishing naval facilities. Rabuka himself had close ties with U.S. military personal, having worked alongside U.S. forces in the Siani, and attended U.S. sponsored training courses including one of the prestigious pacific Armies Management Seminars.

Evidence of high-level U.S. involvement is seen in the fact that Vernon Walters, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, met Colonel Rabuka in Suva a week before the Coup. Walters had a well-

documented career of involvement in attempts to remove governments of Third World nations unsympathetic to U.S. interests.\textsuperscript{44}

Furthermore, ten days after the May coup, Ratu Mara announced in a meeting of the council of Chiefs that U.S. secretary of State George Schultz had given an assurance of support for the post-coup constitutional arrangements made by Colonel Rabuka. Schultz had supposedly commented that America was "on stand-by to help if needed".\textsuperscript{45}

The State Department firmly denied all U.S. involvement in the coups, and has been highly critical of what they refer to as "widespread disinformation effort."\textsuperscript{46} The U.S. sensitivities motivated the release of a detailed statement which attempts to refute a wide range of allegations and explain the circumstantial evidence. In conclusion, informed observers suggest that the U.S. appears not to have been directly involved in preparations for the coup, but that instead U.S. officials in Suva made little attempt to discourage such preparations. They can thus be seen to have been culpable by omission of creating a climate conducive to a coup attempt.

**REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE FIJI COUPS**

Fiji lies at a pivotal position within the Pacific. Since it achieved independence from Britain in 1970, Fiji has wielded considerable power in regional politics. Fiji’s Prime Minister Ratu Mara had assumed the mantle of elder statesman of the island Pacific, and he was an authoritative spokesman on regional affairs. A number of regional organisations are based in Fiji. These include the secretariat of the South Pacific Forum - the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation (SPEC), the University of the South Pacific, and the regional

\textsuperscript{44} Covert Action Information Bulletin, no. 26, Summer 1986, pp. 3-8.
\textsuperscript{45} Fiji Times, 26\textsuperscript{th} May 1987.
\textsuperscript{46} Fiji Times, 14 November 1987. The statement was issued through the US consulate in Sydney. It specifically made mention of allegations in the Sydney Morning Heralds, the Pacific Islands Monthly of October 1987, and the New Zealand newsletter Wellington Confidential of June 1987. All these publications had carried detailed reports that publicised possible United States involvement in the coup.
s of the United Nations Development Programme, the European Community and the British Development Division.

Fiji was also at the hub of transport and communication links within the region, and its economic influence was considerable. As a consequence any threat to Fiji's economic prosperity or political stability would have serious repercussions throughout the region. In Tanga, for example, there were concerns that the coups could result in a general withdrawal of investment and industry from the region. The economy of Tonga is directly threatened, in as much as it depends on Fiji as a major source of imports and as a middleman for Tonga's exports. There are also concerns arising out of Fiji's role as a major diplomatic contract between the region and the developed world. All of Tonga's consular relations with the United States, for instance, are maintained through the American Embassy in Suva. And, as was recently suggested, as long as the situation in Fiji dominates regional affairs "the other islands of the region face the danger of falling into diplomatic obscurity".

There are also fears that the growing record of instability in the Pacific islands has shattered the region's reputation. The universal perception of a Pacific idyll has finally been laid to rest. The imposition of martial law in Papua New Guinea to curb a growing crime problem, political assassinations in Palau, firebombings in Nauru, and clashes between French troops and Kanaks in New Caledonia, have already dented the picture of island life. The Fiji coups, with their racist overtones, have finally broken the image of the "Pacific Way". The harsh reality of island life has been exposed for the world to see.

But despite this, most Pacific islanders while disagreeing with the methods used, sympathise with the aims of the coup. The desire to protect the rights of indigenous Pacific islanders, who are minorities in their own land, has touched deep-rooted sensitivities amongst the Hawaiian people in Hawaii, the Maoris in New Zealand, the Chamorros

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2. Bain, n.15, p.22.
in Guam, and has further confused the issues surrounding the Kanaks in New Caledonia. French officials are quietly pleased at the turn of events in Fiji. For by condoning the Fiji coup and its implicit anti-democratic racist connotations, Pacific Island politicians have lost the moral imperative they enjoyed when criticising French policies in New Caledonia.

The long term effects of Fiji's coup point to increased instability in regional affairs. Fiji has been a moderating force in the region bringing together the diverse political interests and different cultures found in the Pacific Island.49 Always a strong supporter of the South Pacific Forum, Fiji's political clout and reputation has waned following the coup. The unity of the region is threatened.

The Melanesian countries have forged themselves into a political bloc called the Melanesian Spearhead Group. In August 1987 the King of Tonga proposed the formation of a Polynesian based organization to look after the economic and cultural interests of the Polynesian people. Moreover the weaknesses of the South Pacific Forum were apparent at its annual meeting at the end of May 1987, in Apia, Western Samoa. Racial insensitivities were rife, and political naivety flourished. Efforts to keep a contentious issue like the Fiji coup from being discussed failed in the face of concerted politicking by Australia's prime minister, Bob Hawke. This underlined the subservience of island interests to the political strength of a major regional power like Australia, and highlighted the political fragility of the island Pacific.

All this suggests that the impact of such regional forums as lobbyists on the world stage are limited. Questions are already being asked whether the Pacific islands actually have enough in common to justify the luxury of major regional organizations. Whether there is any real commitment to regionalism may well be tested in 1968, when other Pacific countries will decide whether to continue to support regional

49 Robie, n.1. p.22.
institutions based in Fiji, such as the University of the South Pacific (USP). Already there were indications that the Solomon Islands, Tonga and Western Samoa may no longer send new students to USP, and had reduced their financial commitment. In the past Fiji had provided up to 70 per cent of USP’s recurrent budget, a sum it is unlikely to be able to afford. It was uncertain who will meet the short fall in the future.50

Fears were also been expressed that regional disunity could be exploited by overseas influences. The strategic significance of the region is such that superpower rivalries may impinge on regional affairs. For example, the proposal for a Pacific Alliance Treaty (PAT) has brought the Pacific islands into a defensive alignment allied to U.S. interests. The objective of PAT was to ensure collective defence and economic cooperation, and as such is loosely based on the model used successfully in NATO.

There was marked international interest in events in Fiji. France gave its implicit support to the military regime when Gaston Flosse, the French Minister for the South Pacific, met Colonel Rabuka in September 1987 and offered to provide military aid.51 The French navy was involved in joint naval exercises with ships of the Fiji Naval Squadron in August 1987. David Lange, New Zealand’s prime minister, has expressed his concern at the security implications for New Zealand of further destabilisation in the region if Fiji turns into an “economic basketcase.” Moreover, the threat of regional destabilisation could be aggravated if the military regime in Fiji accepted the offer of aid made by Colonial Quadhafi of Libya.

The establishment of a military regime in Fiji has strained the once secure relationship between the Pacific islands and the Australian and New Zealand governments.52 The new government in Fiji is attempting to break its traditional economic reliance on Australia and New Zealand by

50 Bain, n.15, p.12.
52 Thakur, n. 20.
seeking aid and trade with countries in Southeast Asia. Malaysia has given strong support to the new regime and has provided humanitarian aid. One of the most significant developments has been the speed of Indonesia's response to Fiji's overtures. Indonesian officials visited Fiji at the end of October 1987, and negotiated a trade agreement whereby Indonesia would buy Fiji sugar, and export rice, arms and petroleum products to Fiji.

The Indonesian policy of promoting links with the Pacific island nations is seen in Canberra as a threat to Australia's strategic interests. It must also be seen in the context of the exposures of Indonesian involvement in Papua New Guinea politics by funding a political party. These accusations include allegations of treachery against the country's former foreign minister, Ted Diro, who claims he was bribed by senior Indonesian officials to sign a PNG-Indonesia Friendship Treaty. It is somewhat ironical to note the willingness of Melanesian countries in acquiescing to Indonesian advances, and the way they have chosen to disregard Indonesia's poor human rights record with the Melanesian population of East Timor and Irian Jaya.

PRESENT POLITICS AND FOREIGN RELATIONS

Fiji is a member of the United Nations and many of its associated agencies as well as of several regional organizations, including the South Pacific Commission and the South Pacific Forum. Since June 1978 it has been a major contributor to UN peacekeeping forces, the expenses of which (totalling more than $100 million by 1993) have been assumed by the United Nations. In December 1994 opposition MPs criticized the government for supplying international peacekeeping personnel while failing to curb increases in domestic crime. In response, the home minister pointed out the contribution to national income resulting from the policy.53

The republican proclamation of October 1987 occurred during a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting at Vancouver, Canada, prompting a declaration that Fiji's membership in the grouping had "lapsed." The joint statement went on to say that Fiji's status might be reconsidered should "the circumstances warrant," with British Prime Minister Thatcher pointedly noting that the Commonwealth encompassed 26 other republics and at least four military governments; however, readmission required the unanimous endorsement of the members, with India reluctant to give its assent under constitutional arrangements perpetuating native Fijian control. Fiji was readmitted to the Commonwealth in August 1997 (effective October 1), following adoption of the new constitution.

In early 1995 two new issues entered Fijian politics. The first, turning on a government decision to lift the ban on Sunday commercial and sporting activities, was welcomed by Fiji's business community, but strongly opposed by the influential Methodist Church, whose president declared that his followers were prepared to "lay down their lives" to have the decision overturned.54 (Despite the intensity of the opposition, the House of Representatives voted unanimously on September 18 to repeal the Sunday Observance Decree, while the Church's position eventually softened following the appointment of a more moderate president). The second controversy stemmed from a government plan to open the country to massive immigration by Hong Kong Chinese for a fee of $30,000 per family and an investment of an additional $100,000. Some viewed the scheme, also opposed by church leaders, as an act of hypocrisy by a government determined to maintain political control by indigenous inhabitants. In early 1997 Prime Minister Rabuka announced that the immigration programme, which polls suggested was opposed by nearly three-quarters of the population, was nearing completion.55

53 Ibid.
During 1996 considerable uncertainty prevailed as to the response of Indian farmers to the expiration of some 1,500 land leases during the ensuing three years. \(^{56}\) Opposition leader Jai Ram Reddy called on the government to reserve state and freehold land for resettlement of Indians who, he said, would vacate leased land if compensated for improvements made during their periods of tenure. For his part, in contrast to assertions by a recently formed Taukei Cane Growers Association, Prime Minister Rabuka assured farmers that there would be no mass evictions when the leases would expire.

\(^{56}\) Fiji Times (Suva: 29 May, 1997). p.8