The 1987 Military Coups in Fiji: The Regional Implications

Roderic Alley

In this paper I shall analyze the regional impact of the military coups that occurred in Fiji during 1987. As if not significant enough in themselves, these events occurred in the country that, given its relative size, central location, and previous role in fostering regional cooperation, remained a critical focus for the South Pacific. Because of the prominence of Australia and New Zealand as actors in the region, I shall devote considerable attention to how governments in those countries reacted, how their involvement in the region influenced the accommodations they developed with the postcoup regime, and the extent to which wider international implications played a part in shaping the adjustments that Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka's coups forced on the Pacific Islands.

By any reckoning, these remarkable events were as untoward as they were unforeseen. In the relatively untroubled politics of the postindependence Pacific, governments were as unprepared nationally as they were regionally to manage a coherent response to the new order in Fiji. One dilemma more acute for some than for others involved a reconciliation of internationally respectable positions on support for human rights and peaceful constitutional change in Fiji with avoidance of charges of unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of another regional state.

From an empirical perspective, one challenge is to determine how and why contrasting regional actors responded to the coups and whether, if at all, they modified Pacific regional policies accordingly. A further challenge is to ascertain the impact of the military coups on the fabric of regional cooperation in the Pacific—whether from the perspective of the management of the relevant agencies concerned, or the less tangible but no less significant considerations of the working morale among officials still

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headquartered in the capital of the country where the region's first military coup was staged.

Added to these empirical and policy considerations is the question of what the coups in Fiji revealed about the region's international relations. That includes not only political cooperation within the Pacific region, or significant questions about how Australia and New Zealand handled the issue through their external relations, but the wider international implications for the Commonwealth, the United Nations, and the interests of such actors as France and the United States.

The First Military Coup

When the first military coup was staged by Colonel Rabuka in May 1987, the regional political climate was more than usually tense following wide, if unsatisfactorily substantiated, allegations about Libyan involvement in Vanuatu. The allegations were regarded as sufficiently serious to warrant a hasty visit to New Zealand by the then Australian Foreign Minister Bill Hayden, who briefed New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange early in May about assumed Libyan involvement in the South Pacific. This episode was all the more puzzling in that until then the two men had not met officially in New Zealand. More widely, there was considerable if often confused debate as to whether "the security" of the Pacific Islands was under threat from growing Soviet intentions through commercial fishing arrangements with such tiny states as Kiribati, apparently making the region subject to competing superpower pressures. The atmosphere of uncertainty encouraged member states of the South Pacific Forum to take cautious positions on security questions.

When Colonel Rabuka staged his decisive putsch against the recently elected coalition government of Dr Timoci Bavadra on 14 May 1987, the people of Fiji were not alone in being taken utterly by surprise. Although Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific Forum states were equally astounded by Rabuka's audacity, the hesitancy of their responses signified that, in an upheaval of this magnitude, the region's self-proclaimed consensus about a "Pacific Way" was singularly nonexistent as a mechanism for the management of a local political crisis. In part this could be attributed to understandable confusion about the true situation in Fiji—in particular the extent to which the governor-general, who assumed full executive authority soon after the coup, was prepared to uphold the provisions

of the 1970 constitution. Just as significant was an intuitive recoil by most governments in the region from anything that could be construed as unwarranted interference in Fiji's internal affairs. In addition there was a reluctance, once the coup had occurred, for island governments to be seen to acknowledge either their need for information from Australia or New Zealand about what was really happening in Fiji, or especially how they should respond to it. For some Pacific Island governments at least, the confusions that followed the first coup were more than a little convenient as justification for delay or unwillingness to act.

For New Zealand, the initial response was quick and clear: Prime Minister Lange deplored the illegal seizure of power by the military; save for the protection of New Zealand nationals, there would be no physical intervention; all existing military training and some bilateral aid ties were cut forthwith; and the constitutional authority of the governor-general—such as it was—would remain the basis for New Zealand's dealings with Fiji. Relishing the publicity and authority that these dramatic developments afforded him barely three months prior to a general election, Lange then targeted Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara for strong criticism. Had Mara wished to defuse the conditions that permitted the coup to hatch, Lange claimed, then he had ample opportunity and standing to do so. By his links with Rabuka, Mara had "allied himself with a person who purported to dismiss the Governor General, to suspend the constitution and announce they would have a new constitution which will be a republic if necessary. You can't actually do much more than that" (*NZH,* 19 May 1987). Within days of the coup, the New Zealand government had suspended Air New Zealand flights to Fiji, following the abortive hijacking of one of its jumbo jets at Nadi airport, while warning tourists against visiting the country. Like other countries in the region, New Zealand realized that little progress could be expected, if any, until a scheduled meeting of the South Pacific Forum at Apia, Western Samoa, was convened in late May.

In contrast, the initial postcoup response from Australia was more hesitant, partly because of Foreign Minister Hayden's refusal to permit Fiji's turmoil to curtail his tour of European capitals. To the extent that something could be salvaged for the ousted Dr Bavadra, the possibility of intervention was not entirely ruled out by Canberra in the first instance. Relatively soon, however, the Australian government was expressing its condemnation of the coup by cuts in aid, suspension of military assis-

tance, and support for the governor-general's presumed attempts to effect a constitutional settlement. Totally unacceptable to Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke was any possibility of the new regime being represented at the forthcoming Forum meeting; the choice between postponement and his personal boycott, should illegal Fijian representation occur at the meeting, was privately conveyed by the Australian leader to his counterparts in the region (*Dominion,* 28 May 1987).

Because the coup represented a conspicuous news media event, some friction was apparent between Lange and Hawke as to which of them deserved to make most of the running on the issue. Hawke, for example, was irked by Lange's "thoughts out loud" on the possibility of Australia–New Zealand cooperation in transporting home a battalion of Fiji soldiers serving with United Nations forces in the Sinai. Lange then failed to indicate a common interest when Hawke announced the expulsion of the Libyan Peoples Bureau from Canberra (Grant 1987*a*). Following their condemnation of any suggestion that support be given to the possible use of outside military intervention, which would "be contrary to international law" (*NZH,* 21 May 1987), both Australia and New Zealand were criticized by leaders from Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu for not using what they described as established procedures for consultation within the region.

This response put paid to efforts being made by representatives of Dr Bavadra's ousted government to have some kind of international peacekeeping or investigative mission mounted for Fiji, a possibility that was canvassed by a three-member group, consisting of Coalition Foreign Minister Krishna Datt, Education Minister Dr Tupeni Baba, and Labour and Immigration Minister Joeli Kalou, that visited Australia and New Zealand shortly after the coup. Although these representatives gained considerable public support with their call for firmer international action than any immediately forthcoming, their leader, Dr Bavadra, was soon expressing reservations about the continuing shifts of emphasis being made by Lange and later Hawke (*NZH,* 10 June 1987).

Once it was apparent that Governor-General Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau was far from being the neutral protector of Fiji's constitutional interests that Australian and New Zealand official statements claimed, and once Lange made it plain that Bavadra ought to join the governor-general's council of ministers to help effect a political settlement, doubts intensified within the ousted Coalition about whether New Zealand's condemnation

of the coup was more hollow than real. Within barely a month of branding Ratu Mara a traitor, Lange was publicly applauding his "valiant efforts" to reach a constitutional settlement (*NZH,* 9 June 1987). To some degree, this sudden and unexpected show of faith in Mara was influenced by Lange's belief that the efforts being made by some senior figures of the New Zealand judiciary could bear results. Through their links as members of the Fiji Court of Appeal, it was known that some senior New Zealand judges had urged on Chief Justice Sir Timoci Tuivaga the necessity to do all he could to persuade the governor-general of his responsibilities to uphold the existing constitution, retain the rule of law, and maintain links with the Crown. As well, the New Zealand prime minister was fully aware that, conservative and tradition-bound though it remained, the Great Council of Chiefs was aware of these responsibilities and that, between them, Mara and Ganilau could yet build support through that body for a return to constitutional rule.

For both Australia and New Zealand, the broader necessity in the immediate aftermath of the coup consisted not just of making some sense of a confused constitutional situation, nor of curbing damage to national property, personnel, or even aid projects. It entailed holding to a line of at least tolerable regional political cohesion pending the forthcoming heads of government meeting of the South Pacific Forum. Limitation of damage was the highest priority; any steps the Forum might take in support of a return to constitutional rule in Fiji would be a bonus. Ironically, while Fiji did not appear as a formal agenda item in the planned deliberations of the Forum, a heading that was duly discussed was: Information Exchange on International Developments Affecting the Security of the Region (SPF 1987*a*).

The May 1987 South Pacific Forum

On the subject of Fiji, the Forum meeting issued a general statement that expressed "deep concern and anguish . . . at the overthrow of the elected government in Fiji" but "recognising the complexity of the problems" expressed hopes "for a peaceful and satisfactory solution to the current problems" (SPF 1987*a,* para 5). An attempt was made to have Ganilau accept a three-member mission headed by Australian Prime Minister Hawke, Prime Minister Ezekiel Alebua of the Solomons, and Director Henry Naisali of the Forum's key servicing agency (SPEC). They would

visit Suva if requested and "hold discussions with all parties in Fiji with a view to attempting to facilitate processes leading to a resolution of current problems" (SPF 1987*b*, para 5).

However well intentioned (and that is open to some question), this initiative proved a minor diplomatic disaster. Friction arose between Hawke and Prime Minister Paias Wingti of Papua New Guinea as to how the message either was or should have been conveyed to Suva. For other observers, the refusal of the governor-general to accept such a mission became a virtual certainty once it was clear Hawke would lead the mission, because this was seen as reawakening suspicions about the dominant power in the region wielding undue influence. That such a perception existed among a number of South Pacific Forum governments was perhaps less surprising than the alacrity with which it was expressed. At any rate, the newly installed interim council of ministers in Fiji, including both Ratu Mara and coup leader Rabuka, had little cause for apprehension about any regional pressures that would force them to abandon their increasingly dominant objective: the legitimating of Fijian political paramountcy through a new constitution.

Hence by August 1987, the outlines of the Great Council of Chiefs' plan for a single-chamber legislature numerically dominated by Fijians were being publicized, as were the reservation of key political offices for Fijians and the exclusive use of communal representation. Equally significant were doubts, about whether the regime would leave the Commonwealth and become a republic, that gave Australian and New Zealand officials an opportunity to exercise some influence on the deliberations that occurred prior to the second coup.

Departure from the Commonwealth, such officials would have warned the interim council, represented a real cost for Fiji that could involve a loss of useful intergovernmental political, economic, and functional contacts, reduced aid, and fewer opportunities for highly popular sporting exchanges. More significant than these, however, was the emotional and psychological wrench that a rupture of allegiance to the Crown and the Queen would unavoidably represent for ordinary Fijians, who customarily identified such sentiments with loyalty to Fiji, its land, way of life, and chiefly structure of authority. (It was no accident that the original date of independence, 10 October 1970, was chosen to coincide with exactly 96 years of formal British rule since the Deed of Cession). Another consideration was the extent to which Ratu Mara, a knight of the realm, could be persuaded to accept that his place in the history of his country would be

less sullied were he to accept the need for a constitutional arrangement that allowed for a fairer ethnic balance in the legislature than that recommended by the Great Council of Chiefs.

In a letter to Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau in July 1987, Prime Minister Lange indicated that should the proposed solution "be one that is discriminatory and undemocratic in ways which are unacceptable to significant sections of the people of the country, it will be hard to see international relations with Fiji return to normality."[1] To the extent that Fiji sustained economic damage following the May coup, including a decline in tourism, falling sugar production following industrial disruption, growing inflation, and unemployment, as well as the longer-term worries flowing from out-migration of skilled and professional workers, the incentives to make real concessions in favor of a return to constitutional rule were tangible enough.

For Prime Minister Hawke, the intercoup period was one in which an attempt was made to influence Fiji toward the path of constitutional respectability. Although Canberra permitted the appointment of a Fijian high commissioner to Australia in July, it was maintained that this implied no recognition of the coup. In a letter to the governor-general at that time, Hawke indicated support for his efforts to "try and secure a proper outcome" (*NZH,* 15 July 1987). While Hawke acknowledged that Australia was unpopular in some quarters in Fiji, goodwill was manifest in the lifting of the trade union ban against cargo going to Fiji, and through the arrival of the new high commissioner. Future levels of aid would remain under review. In response the governor-general outlined what he believed were measures to return Fiji to normalcy, welcomed the lifting of the union ban, but expressed serious concern about the future loss of aid (ibid).

To the extent that they were public, the attempts by Australia and New Zealand, taken individually but often following joint consultation, represented the major regional effort to influence the interim council regime during the intercoup period. Nothing further was heard of a Papua New Guinea proposal, initially made just prior to the May Forum heads of government meeting in Apia, for a conference to solve the constitutional crisis in Fiji. To the extent that any outside contact could be made with the regime, Papua New Guinea favored either informal or lower level approaches (*PIM,* Aug 1987, 9).

Only in Australia or New Zealand could it be said that any kind of constituency existed for either the ousted Bavadra Coalition government or

the Indian community in Fiji. Through the news media, some individuals attacked what they regarded as pusillanimity by Australia or New Zealand for insufficient support of Bavadra. And via public meetings hosted for representatives of the ousted government, or through trade union bans and denunciations of the military-backed regime, governments in Wellington and Canberra were well aware that their respective Fiji policies were being critically followed by interested groups and members of the public. Among the goals of bodies such as the Wellington-based Coalition for Democracy in Fiji was representation at public, governmental, and international levels for the "demilitarisation of political power and an early return to civilian rule under a democratic Constitution accepted and supported by all of Fiji's multiracial communities; public and financial support for the accomplishment of these ends; a continuous monitoring of the situation in Fiji"; and support for the "rights of indigenous Fijians to self determination and development of their land, culture, identity, religious beliefs and other resources, to the extent these are consistent with Fiji's legal and moral obligations to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights 1948" (*Sunrise* 1988).

The regime in Suva retaliated by a variety of means, helped less by any outright defense from South Pacific governments, including Tonga, the Cook Islands, and Papua New Guinea, than by their spirited attack on "outsiders" told they would do well to attend to their own domestic problems before urging Fiji's return to constitutional rule. Such statements implied that neither Australia nor New Zealand was in a position to urge a return to civil and political rights in Fiji while they themselves held discontented and dispossessed autochthonous Aboriginal and Maori peoples. Rabuka showed less interest in ascribing motives of neocolonialism or selective ethnic bias by Australia and New Zealand than in complaining that outsiders did not understand his situation (Rabuka 1987). Either way, such criticisms gave little attention to whether the interests of all races in Fiji might be better promoted or safeguarded under conditions of civil rule, rights under law, or peaceful political change.

The Second Military Coup

When Colonel Rabuka's impatience with the political discussions leading to an accord at Deuba finally snapped, precipitating his second coup, the response from Australia and New Zealand was one of dismay. Following

Rabuka's rescinding of the 1970 constitution, declaration of republican status, and withdrawal from the Commonwealth, New Zealand further reduced its aid program, curtailed concessions available to Fiji sugar exporters, and recalled its high commissioner. These steps were greeted with consternation by numerous Fijians, but Rabuka could claim his country was far from isolated on the international stage. At the Vancouver Commonwealth heads of government meeting in October, where Fiji was a key issue, none other than British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher observed archly that at least four members of the existing Commonwealth were military regimes, many others had republican status, and Fiji did not deserve isolation, much less expulsion (*Dominion,* 17 Oct 1987).

The second, coup, however, constitutionally more decisive in outcome than its predecessor, served to highlight what had become an increasingly narrow, if not precarious, policy approach by Australia and New Zealand. Having backed the governor-general solidly in the hope that he could use the status of his office to encourage a return to genuine constitutional rule, they were now acutely embarrassed at his acceptance of office as president of the new republican regime. One reason they had supported keeping the governor-general at the apex of the customary Fijian order was their belief that the most senior chiefs, because of their status and loyalty to the Crown, would be able to rein in Rabuka before he bolted from the Commonwealth. Even shortly after the second coup, New Zealand Foreign Minister Russell Marshall was speaking of "a beginning of a stacking up of Fijian chiefs in opposition to the line Rabuka has taken" (*NZH,* 30 Sept 1987). Another view was that the second coup had simply exposed Australian and New Zealand policy for what it was—a de facto willingness to work with the new regime. More forcefully for one New Zealand-based observer, Ramesh Thakur, British, Australian, and New Zealand support for the role of the governor-general in the intercoup period had served simply to endorse Rabuka's aims: "The de facto position of Colonel Rabuka as the military strong man of Fiji was legitimised by the governor general and the latter's actions received royal assent" (Thakur 1988).

Shortly after the second coup, but just prior to the Vancouver Commonwealth heads of government meeting, Prime Minister Hawke claimed to journalists that "I don't think any of us, including it seems Dr Bavadra, can realistically expect that there is going to be a constitutional parliamentary system which doesn't involve some greater in-built protection for the

Fijians" (Grant 1987*b*). These remarks were promptly seized upon by Rabuka as evidence that Hawke had "endorsed the need for changes to Fiji's constitution to give greater protection to Fijians" (ibid). By contrast, Dr Bavadra's reaction was one of contempt: "Mr Hawke must first decide whether he stands for the basic principles of representative democracy and the free expression of the will of the people or whether he has reconciled to the philosophy that all power stems from the barrel of a gun" (ibid).

During October 1987, arguably the most arbitrary and chaotic phase of Fiji's year of turmoil, when *taukei*-ism was at its most pronounced within the government, influence over events by either Australia or New Zealand was marginal. With the return of something resembling civilian government under the "interim" administration led by Ratu Mara in December, some opportunities had already become evident. In November, a representative of the Fiji regime, Filipe Bole, visited both Australia and New Zealand with the purpose of commencing a dialogue. After meeting ministers in both capitals, Bole believed he had achieved that objective (*Press,* 20 Nov 1987).

Two months later, in Fiji on a private visit, New Zealand Cabinet Minister Richard Prebble used contacts available through his wife, a native-born Fijian with connections to senior levels of the regime. (The late Ratu David Toganivalu, former Deputy Prime Minister to Ratu Mara, was Mrs Prebble's cousin.) On his return to New Zealand, Prebble said that the draft constitution under study in Fiji was a tolerable one, and that steps should be taken to further links (*Dominion,* 29 Jan 1988). He briefed his cabinet colleagues accordingly. The same month saw a resumption of Australian aid to Fiji, a great disappointment to a representative of the deposed Bavadra Coalition, Dr Tupeni Baba, who said he expected better from the government of a party with principles similar to those of the Fiji Labour Party (*EP,* 25 Jan 1988). New Zealand simultaneously resumed aid to Fiji, but not at precoup levels.

Getting Back to "Normal"

As if keen to convince themselves as much as any one else, governments in the Pacific adopted policies toward the regime in Fiji during 1988 that signified passage of time was itself a normalizing factor regarding the need to deal officially with Suva. That Ratu Mara's interim government had a constitutional plan "under review," at least ostensibly open to public

response in Fiji, allowed the Forum governments to maintain that formal links were being patiently withheld pending the outcome.

Within that scarcely onerous constraint, de facto diplomatic recognition did increase. Reasons given included claims that a continued curb on civilian aid would do more to harm the interests of the Fiji population at large than hinder the legitimacy of the regime; that recognition was more a matter of acknowledging the reality of sovereign states than of dealing with their governments; that if the region was ready to begin interacting with Fiji on a more open basis, then who were Australia or New Zealand to impede such a development; and that if moves were not made to draw Fiji back into the Forum club, then Suva would be open to the increasing enticements of French aid and support—which was anathema to Melanesian governments given their hostility to French policy on New Caledonia.

Given these currents, it was no surprise that Ratu Mara wrote to the prime minister of Western Samoa, then the chairman of the South Pacific Forum, asking for help in "building . . . bridges of understanding" (Barber 1988). Formal links were established between Australia and Fiji in March 1988 with the appointment of an Australian ambassador to Suva. New Zealand followed suit. For Australia, this move was "based on the Government's perception that the interim civilian Government in Fiji was firmly in control and that the establishment of that Government was a step in the direction of the re-establishment of democratic parliamentary government" (ADFA 1988).

A month later, New Zealand's returning ambassador from Suva, Mr Rodney Gates, said Fiji had to find its own solution to its ethnic and constitutional difficulties—a process that could not be speeded and in which "we shouldn't take actions which damage their economy . . . since any economic downturn would introduce new stresses in the community and compound the constitutional difficulties they do have" (*EP,* 12 Apr 1988). At that time Ratu Mara was in London visiting Buckingham Palace where, with the Queen's private secretary, he unsurprisingly failed to restore his country's links with the Crown and the Commonwealth. Nevertheless he was welcomed to Downing Street in a visit to Mrs Thatcher that did little to harm the interim government's quest for international acceptance.

The early months of 1988 signified a quickening acceptance of the need of other governments to begin dealing more openly with the regime in Fiji. In January, Ratu Mara told leaders of the fourteen Forum governments

concerned that Fiji was making positive progress toward a constitution that would return it to parliamentary democracy. However, his letter also indicated that this constitutional framework would ensure "the full protection of the fundamental interests of the indigenous Fijians" (*EP,* 23 Jan 1988). Soon afterward, Nauru opened relations with Suva, and a similar step was taken by the Cook Islands.

In June 1988, the interim government introduced draconian curbs on basic liberties in Fiji, not just to stifle dissent and trade union opposition, but to deter those the regime believed were planning its overthrow. This action was directly linked to seizures in Sydney and Fiji of arms that, it was claimed, were intended for deliberate destabilization of the country. At that time, political violence was disrupting neighboring New Caledonia, and the Mara government used both developments to claim that tough internal security measures were justified. To the consternation of Foreign Minister Marshall, New Zealand Prime Minister Lange denounced the internal decrees as Rabuka's third coup. The measures were subsequently relaxed following adverse international reaction, but they did little to impede a trend toward increasing diplomatic, if not political, acceptance of Fiji by its regional neighbors.

Although diminished in status, Ratu Mara was able to attend the September 1988 heads of government meeting of the South Pacific Forum and insist that internal political and constitutional developments in Fiji not come under discussion. Here he was helped by the Tongan government, which made a point of obstructing attempts by Dr Bavadra's representative, Mr Jone Dakuvula, to gain access to officials. For New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer, having Fiji on the agenda would have retarded efforts to strengthen long-term regional cooperation among the Forum countries: "The idea that the very difficult political issues involving the internal self-government of one country, and the nature of the constitution in that country, can be determined by an organisation of this sort is I am afraid unrealistic" (Radio Australia 1988).[2]

Nevertheless at this meeting both Palmer and Hawke held individual meetings with Ratu Mara, where they expressed concern at a military element being promised a continuing and permanent role in the government under the proposed constitution. Hawke, whose meeting with Ratu Mara was facilitated by Papua New Guinea Foreign Minister Michael Somare, insisted that his foreign minister, Senator Evans, visit Dr Bavadra. Failure to allow such access would mean cancellation of a promised increase of

Australian aid from A$12 million to A$22 million. Although Hawke acknowledged that relations between Australia and Fiji were necessarily damaged by the 1987 coups, his foreign minister emphasized caution. Australia's scope for influence was limited, the matter was essentially internal to Fiji, and while future aid levels would be influenced by the Suva regime's performance on human rights, "at the end of the day we hope that it will be the case that a broadly acceptable constitution is achieved in Fiji. [A restoration of] something like democratic normality even if it is not as satisfactory a basis as existed in the past" would be acceptable (Radio Australia 1988).

Considering this approach along with the attitude of a number of the Polynesian governments attending the 1988 Forum meeting—essentially a position that assumed the difficulty of Fiji would resolve itself given time and noninterference—the implied messages to the Mara regime were as clear as could have been wished. In essence, first the internal situation in Fiji continues to unsettle and potentially destabilize existing systems and codes of regional cooperation; second, our concern will not be openly aired at the South Pacific Forum, both to spare us embarrassment about what to do, and also to prevent you from claiming unwarranted interference; third, provided you produce a constitution that at least nods toward an acknowledgment of the rule of law, guaranteed civil rights, and the opportunity for constitutional change between governments not containing an overt military presence, the door will be open, after a suitable period, to allow your return to our club under conditions resembling normalcy.

A number of factors would have favored such an approach. First, for Australia and New Zealand, was the recognition that within most of their small South Pacific Forum partner states, the attitudes and positions of individual heads of government were critical on the question of Fiji. Whether through officials or other channels, little scope existed in such small states for the presentation of options very different from the personal preferences of the leader in power. It would be wrong to assume that Pacific Island leaders automatically sided with the Fijian chiefly order, but it could not be said that any were willing to go against its interests—at least to the extent of endorsing Dr Bavadra's ousted Coalition government. Further, there was an appreciation that these leaders, reluctant to condemn the coups, and certainly opposed to mobilizing against them, were the people whose trust and cooperation would be required in future

dealings; this indicated the longer-term interests of both Australia and New Zealand in the region.

Second was the awkward question of precedent, in which Australia and New Zealand faced a dilemma. Each had variously promoted the concept of a ready reaction force capable of interceding at short notice under conditions of internal instability within the region; the concept had now faced an acid test and been found wanting. If both governments had decided against the use of force following the first Fiji coup, for whatever reasons, what then of any future contingency? Could it not be argued that then, too, unique circumstances would provide ready arguments against the use of some quick and decisive intrusion? Could not such circumstances provide equally, if not more, compelling arguments against using force?

For the sake of their countries' international and domestic appearances, Canberra and Wellington could well have decided that a sufficiently robust verbal protest to the interim regime was required, yet not so robust that they could be open to charges of unwarranted interference. And where would such a charge arise? Primarily, it seems, from the increasingly vociferous ethnic lobbies in both Australia and New Zealand, keen for ideological reasons to denounce their governments for acts of latter-day colonialism in the Pacific.

Certainly New Zealand Foreign Minister Marshall, who assumed that post after his party's August 1987 return to office, was sensitive to such charges: "Whatever our Western constitutional anxieties might be, we have to be careful [that] what we do does not make us sound white, guilty, patronising, and having a neo-colonialist attitude" (*EP,* 12 Aug 1988). Some opinion leaders in the Maori community, such as Ranginui Walker, condemned Rabuka and his coups, but other Maoris supported the overthrow, something the New Zealand government believed it could not ignore. Nor were representatives of the postcoup regime in Fiji loath to use the opportunities for leverage that this sensitivity presented. For the regime's propagandist, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, the "efforts of the Fijian people to share their heritage with others have been both ignored and spurned in the desire to extend foreign hegemony over an indigenous people. The indigenous Fijians have no desire to suffer the fate of other indigenous people in certain obvious Pacific countries" (*Press,* 5 Jan 1989).

For Papua New Guinea's former prime minister, Michael Somare, the problem in Fiji was not "caused by Fijians. The problem is that they have a multiracial community and sometimes one has to feel that way about

Melanesian or Polynesian groups being the minority in their own country. I think you see the same thing in New Caledonia where the indigenous people form the minority. There is a racial, ethnic group in Fiji who were not there because of their own making but because of other people's making. They happen to be in an island community and they are ahead of the Melanesian Fijians" (*IB,* Dec 1988, 26).

A third, and perhaps more significant factor permitting the postcoup regime the benefit of the doubt over its intentions to return to civilian rule, involved wider foreign policy interests. Here, there were separate, if linked, rationales concerning the South Pacific. The first concerned the future well-being of the South Pacific Forum, which was under increasing pressure to strengthen its capacity for institutional, servicing, and policy implementation. The 1987 coups could not have happened at a worse time for the initiation of such changes. Not only were the facilities located in Suva, but the cooperation of the host government was imperative for any proposed strengthening of the organization to succeed. As key supporters and funding sources for the South Pacific Forum, not to mention related regional institutions such as the Forum Fisheries Agency, the University of the South Pacific, and a variety of multilateral aid activities, Australia and New Zealand were understandably loath to see a past and continuing commitment of resources jeopardized by a Fiji left sulking in repressive isolation.

More broadly, and this would relate specifically to New Zealand, there was the concern that a broken Fiji would mean not just a fractured region, but a diminution of New Zealand's capacity to act as its interpreter to the wider world. A regime in Suva that was palpably hostile to New Zealand might waste little time in conveying that attitude to other governments in the region, thus degrading the quality of cooperation, information, and access needed by New Zealand to play the role of medium. This role assumed increased importance for New Zealand as the South Pacific assumed greater international prominence, as well as permitting Wellington the opportunity for access to important capitals at a time when its antinuclear policy was closing doors.

It was perhaps no accident that at the 1988 meeting of the South Pacific Forum, where the internal situation in Fiji was studiously avoided, an initiative for what was termed a post-Forum dialogue was launched. This would involve invitations to selected outside powers, such as Japan, the United States, or Canada, and agencies such as the Asian Development

Bank, to confer with Forum representatives following each annual heads of government meeting (SPF 1988).

Such an approach acknowledged the necessity to maintain viable structures of intergovernmental cooperation under conditions where the Pacific Islands were vulnerable to the interests, even depredations, of outside interests. These interests included fishing where, after attenuated negotiations, an agreement had been reached between Pacific Island fisheries interests and the United States, as well as trade, investment, nuclear waste dumping, and development assistance. Such unity as the region could muster, it was argued, was essential under conditions where stronger outside interests could see advantage in having it divided and weakened. Politically, such attempts could come from France, already at odds with Australia and New Zealand over decolonization policy in New Caledonia and unabated underground nuclear testing at Moruroa; from Japan or Taiwan over fishing access; or from either superpower for the purposes of denying security to the dominant rival. Indeed in June 1989, France struck a deal with Fiji to build a naval base at Suva, bringing the charge of "cheque book diplomacy" from Lange.

From these considerations, it is not difficult to identify a pattern of response to the Fiji coups consonant with the pragmatic, conventional foreign policy practice of most states. The pursuit of wider values such as the defence of human rights was clearly secondary for Australia and New Zealand. Uppermost had to remain the retention of existing policies of furthering regional objectives through existing institutions, elites, and policies. For different reasons, both Australia and New Zealand were keen not to follow policies toward a postcoup Fiji that would jeopardize their relations with the United States. Though not a major domestic factor in the election of Bavadra's Coalition in 1987, the knowledge that the Coalition's intentions to have Fiji return to its previous policy of banning nuclear ship visits was unwelcome to Washington was widely appreciated by officials in Canberra and Wellington.

These responses indicated a preference, by Australia and New Zealand, to revert to the habits and practices of established national interest diplomacy. No longer unique, the Pacific was now just another arena of external relations in which the use of force, calculations of immediate state interest, and the uses of security intelligence provided an immediate backdrop for assessment.

Within the South Pacific Forum, member states in their diplomatic and

political appraisals of postcoup Fiji adopted a policy that could be identified as "damage control." Rarely a shout, sometimes barely a murmur, but most usually through a mutter, governments went on public record as disapproving Rabuka's action, urging a return to constitutional government permitting peaceful change via the ballot box, and at the same time forswearing actions that could be construed as unwarranted outside interference in Fiji's internal affairs. Attitudes among Pacific elites regarding challenges to their authority by so-called "outsiders," a degree of anti-Asian prejudice that cannot be ignored in the Pacific Islands, and concern with keeping existing systems of commitment to regional cooperation were all pertinent factors.

Yet when the focus shifts to the impact of the coups on the more material, as distinct from declaratory or identifiably public, postures adopted by governments in the region some interesting contradictions begin to appear. In the immediate aftermath of the coups, the Fiji economy faced contraction, decline in export earnings, and serious loss of skills through the out-migration of citizens of Indian ethnicity. Although relatively brief in duration, trade union bans organized from Australia and New Zealand in response to the first coup also aggravated Fiji's economic situation.

In turn, the interim regime headed by Ratu Mara initiated what it claimed were innovative policies designed to ensure the long-term prosperity of Fiji. The showpiece was the tax-free zone established in Fiji late in 1987. By any reckoning, after only a year in existence the scheme had made remarkable progress. Over F$100 millions in foreign exchange had been earned, with a thirteen-year tax holiday granted to 37 foreign-owned companies, of which 27 came from Australia and New Zealand (*NZH,* 24 Jan 1989). This climate of deregulation was at odds with a precoup structure of heavily subsidized regulation that had benefited the state sector and local business, but disadvantaged the young, the poor, and those without connections. A representative of the interim regime, trade secretary Navitilai Naisoro, claimed that "when employment and production in the export sector exceed that of the domestic sector by a big margin, it won't make sense to protect the domestic sector any longer." However, he went on to claim that it "made no sense for investors in New Zealand and Australia to continue operating in those countries when we have such an attractive investment package to offer" (*EP,* 20 Jan 1988).

In the drive for enhanced foreign exchange earnings, the postcoup order was assisted by two devaluations reducing Fiji's currency by a third

of its previous value, by a substantial clamp on trade union activities through its security decrees, and by already existing arrangements to land goods on the Australian and New Zealand markets free of duty under the aegis of the South Pacific Agreement on Trade and Technical Economic Cooperation (SPARTECA). The opportunities created for foreign investment in Fiji saw a boost to the garment industry, where cheap labor was exploited, but incensed New Zealand union interests because of the duty-free access allowed to Fiji-made goods on the New Zealand market (*EP,* 5 Apr 1988).

By the end of 1988, New Zealand had resumed most of its previous NZ$5 million aid program to Fiji, while Australia had increased its allocation from A$12 million to A$16.8 million, with a further A$5.2 million promised following review in 1989. As well, Fiji was receiving aid from France, Japan, and the European Community. Multilateral assistance was forthcoming from the World Bank which had been a regular contributor to Fiji's development programs since 1970, and in 1987 provided a major loan of US$23.4 million for road development (*PR,* 3 Mar 1989). Fiji was also beginning to receive funding from the Japanese Shipbuilding Sasakawa Foundation, ostensibly for scholarships at the University of the South Pacific (*SSD,* 20 Jan 1989). In addition, links between local and regional business interests were being established, such as the New Zealand–Fiji Business Council, which was designed to foster not just investment and market opportunities, but also New Zealand government assistance.

By October 1988, Fiji's foreign exchange stood at a healthy level of F$306 million—the equivalent of seven months of import expenditure. Yet this figure masked some disturbing features of the Fijian economy: there had been a serious decline in capital imports which, added to the severe loss of skills, signaled weak prospects for domestically generated growth outside that provided by traditional earners such as sugar, tourism, fishing, and gold. It was not difficult, therefore, to characterize the Fiji economy as one of reinforcing dependencies, where the country was increasingly vulnerable and sensitive to trade and investment fluctuations, where its earnings remained in the unprocessed commodity sector, and where these realities served to perpetuate existing internal divisions, whether based on wealth, race, or regional allegiance.

So far as the wider regional impact was concerned, in particular the effect of relevant Australian and New Zealand policies and economic

practices, little was done that could be regarded as assisting Fiji toward greater economic autonomy. Something of a dual paradox became increasingly evident: Fiji's postcoup regime articulated a rhetoric of heightened independence within the region, yet took actions that further cemented its domestic and international economic structures within an edifice of dependency; the region articulated a rhetoric of allowing Fiji to find its own path back to "normalcy," yet took actions that, unwittingly or not, ensured the postcoup regime would remain locked in dependency on international capital, skills, and trade access.

Whether through leaving the Commonwealth and becoming a republic, courting economic or military assistance from France, Israel, Taiwan, or Indonesia, or offering continued service in United Nations peacekeeping operations, Fiji following its coups was unmistakably more dependent, vulnerable, and even supplicatory. Public utterances to the contrary, the regime's earnings growth coupled with infrastructural decay, its employment of poorly paid and semiskilled workers amidst a flight of professionals, and its official veneration of traditional village livelihood practices together with an obsequious enlistment of foreign money further highlighted the paradox.

Conclusions

Just two years since the first of Fiji's military coups, what can be usefully adduced regarding their regional impact? For a variety of reasons, other Pacific nations were predisposed to accept Rabuka's coups as *faits accomplis*. Although they were certainly more than token, such forms of support for the luckless Dr Bavadra as existed in the region were overshadowed by what were considered more important realities, including a concern not to be seen as unduly interfering in Fiji's internal affairs. Such interference would, it was perceived, as likely generate problems as solve them and would also create unwanted precedents for future intervention in the internal politics of small Pacific states by possibly well-meaning, but probably bigger states.

Linked to these concerns was the oft-stated claim that Fiji should be left to sort out its own constitutional and political solutions. That it had been left alone during both the orderly conduct of a General Election in April 1987, which precipitated the first coup a month later, and then during the Deuba Accord of September 1987, which immediately precipitated the sec-

ond, were facts that went largely ignored. Assumptions conveyed by the "leave Fiji to solve it own problems" approach, were beliefs about its eventual return to "reasonableness," the incentives that existed for its full return to regional cooperation, and its self-interest in wanting a viable economy based on the rule of law and peaceful political change.

Any statements deploring the coups made by governments in the region remained secondary to a greater perceived need to retain a viable fabric of regional cooperation, acknowledging Fiji's central physical and functional location. Stated negatively, had the postcoup regimes been of a mind to do so, they could have seriously damaged existing and future Pacific regional linkages. Whether for future cooperation in negotiating fishing arrangements with external operators, for the future of the Pacific Forum Line, or for strengthening the institutional fabric of the South Pacific Forum itself, a region divided was seen as a region vulnerable. These beliefs were confirmed less by the formation of the so-called Melanesian Spearhead group than by the attempts made by France to enlist the support of Polynesian elites with blandishments of aid, recognition of status, or efforts to deflect opposition to French nuclear testing and a troubled record of decolonization in New Caledonia (Richardson 1988).

The wider political order of the region was heavily shaken by the Fiji military coups. Without resulting in direct emulation, they nevertheless encouraged the active threat of force, physical confrontation, and a deliberate buckling of civilian institutions by noncompliance, obstruction, and harassment. This was an acceleration in the politics of brinkmanship subsequently witnessed in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.

For Australia and New Zealand, the Fiji coups underlined misgivings about using force in the region. Although the capability existed, and 1988 disturbances in Vanuatu saw that country's leader seriously considering the feasibility of a police presence from Australia, New Zealand, or Papua New Guinea, the impact of events in Fiji pushed that possibility toward the bottom of the list of options. Formerly in a close military training relationship with Fiji, New Zealand, following the rupture caused by the coups, began conducting training and exercises in the wider region. Both Australia and New Zealand learned difficult lessons about the need for better local political intelligence regarding internal developments in Fiji. Both countries used the ambiguities of the governor-general's constitutional position following the first coup to try to facilitate a return to civilian rule without being seen as directly interfering.

Although of some significance, the steps taken by Australia and New Zealand in retaliation against Rabuka were calculated as being only that. To do less could be seen as implicitly condoning the use of force; to do more, an incitement for the rogue element in Fiji to run further amok, not just within the country, but by wrecking painfully constructed diplomatic structures in the wider region as well. If that involved a compromise in both purpose and execution in their handling of Rabuka's Fiji, then this was judged the least unpalatable option.

Notes

1 The letter was dated 8 July 1987 and sent prior to a Great Council of Chiefs meeting known to favor endorsement of the exclusive use of communal methods of representation in Fiji (*Auckland Star,* 23 July 1987).

2 Palmer, who attended the Forum meeting, subsequently confirmed that the Melanesian states and, particularly, Tonga lobbied to keep Fiji off the Forum agenda. Members of the Forum Secretariat had also opposed raising the subject (*NZH,* 21 October 1988).

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