Fiji's strongman has effected a strange volte face. Dale Keeling reports that it heralds the decline of the racist resurgence in Fiji.

When Sitiveni Rabuka appeared at the union picket lines outside Suva's Colonial War Memorial Hospital midway through last year, few people paid much serious attention. The national strike by the Nurses Association had drawn considerable public sympathy, and Rabuka, the man who in 1987 said that he wanted to turn Fiji's vibrant union movement into a carbon copy of Singapore's government-controlled labour organisations, had nothing to lose from backing the nurses.

A year later, Rabuka is being denounced by some erstwhile colleagues from his post-coup cabinets for having sold out to the union movement. Sakeasi Butadroka, an extreme nationalist and supporter of the 1987 coups, told a small anti-union rally in Taukei in mid-July, that Rabuka should "never be trusted again". According to Butadroka, Rabuka had betrayed Fijian interests by bringing the national union leadership and the republic's president together to settle a pending national general strike on the terms demanded by the unions. Certainly the role played by Rabuka in averting the national strike planned for July 16 was quite remarkable, particularly given the aura of victory it gave to the Fiji Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party, once among Rabuka's bitterest enemies.

Since the 1990 nurses' strike, Rabuka has promised gold miners that he would never send the troops in to break their strike, which is now more than five months old. He then extended this guarantee to the striking sugar cane farmers, the majority of whom are Indian, thereby precipitating a political crisis for the interim regime that he had originally appointed. This gradual change in Rabuka's attitude towards trade unionism has to a large extent been the result of his partial disillusionment with the chiefly system in whose name he mounted both military coups in 1987. During the last 12 months he has openly supported a policy of Fijian commoners taking a far greater role in government and business, a policy that does not sit well with some of the aristocratic chiefs, who believe that political control is their birthright. It has also been noticeable that racist comments from the man who once wanted the country's large Indian community to leave have dwindled to zero.
Last year he again surprised everybody by meeting with Indian squatters evicted by the interim regime and providing them with food parcels.

The differences between the old and the new Rabuka have sharpened in response to important changes in Fijian society. Over the last few years there has been a steadily growing number of indigenous Fijian sugar cane farmers, an occupation once the near-exclusive domain of the Indian community. Within the paid workforce there are also far more Fijians, and this has been reflected in the trade unions. The country's largest union, the Fiji Public Service Association, often painted by extremist demagogues as an 'Indian-dominated union', has now a majority of Fijian members. Yet there has been no discernible move by those Fijians either to overthrow their high-profile leaders, who are Labour Party stalwarts, or to leave and join the ethnically exclusive Viti Civil Servants' Association, a creation of the regime.

These changes have served to blur the lines between the Indian and Fijian communities and, most importantly, have brought more Fijians into the mainstream of Labour politics. During the cane farmers' harvest boycott, one of the most outspoken leaders of the National Farmers' Union (NFU) was Martika Silimaibau, a Fijian. NFU and Labour Party officials have expressed their delight at the multi-racial composition of the large crowds drawn to the NFU's meetings throughout the cane belt.

According to the Fiji Labour Party's acting president, Dr Tupeni Baba, the changes in Rabuka's position are not just overnight opportunism: "I think Rabuka has seen what is happening to the commoner in Fiji. In 1987 he knew little about politics and the way that the system of government works. He was a military man. After four years his naivety has been replaced by his own first-hand experiences. He can see now that many of our goals were justified and that we had the support of a sizeable number of Fijians."

Concerned at the incompetence, the lack of concern for poor Fijians and the confrontational policies of the interim regime, Rabuka gave an interview to the Fiji Times on June 8, in which he called on the regime to resign. The catalyst for the call was a statement by the President, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, in which he threatened to send troops in against striking cane farmers. The publication of Rabuka's response caused a political crisis and for several days it even looked as if a coup was possible - but this time against the men he himself had put back in power four years previously.

Rabuka went so far as to draw up a list of Ministers that he wanted to appoint to a government that he would lead. The list never became public, however, because ultimately he was left with a coup option that he would never take - the arrest of the country's most powerful aristocrats, including Ratu Penaia, a man who is also Rabuka's traditional paramount chief. In the end he made a private, although some say guarded apology, resigned from the army and joined the cabinet that he had denounced so strongly just a few weeks earlier.

For Labour leader Dr Baba, a cousin of Rabuka's, there was never any chance that the Labour-led coalition would join a Rabuka government. "We don't support military coups", he told me. However, the coalition stated that they would give some thought to consultations about the makeup of a new government of national unity based on the Deuba Accords signed between the two former prime ministers (Dr Timoci Bavadra and Ratu Mara) and the then Governor-General, Ratu Penia, in September 1987.

Those accords, which would have steered Fiji back to parliamentary democracy, provoked Rabuka's second coup, but have remained the linchpin of the coalition's policies for a return to parliamentary democracy ever since. During August, the Labour Party will hold its annual convention in Lautoka, the centre of its Western power base. The delegates will there debate the wisdom or otherwise of a boycott of national elections proposed for next year. They may also elect a new leader, a course necessary following the decision of Adi Kuini Bavadra to live in Australia with her new husband.

The coalition won the 1987 general elections by building an alliance between working- and middle-class Indians, Western rural Fijians and urban Fijians in Suva. It is that alliance which the constitution is specifically designed to frustrate, through four particular measures. Firstly, the Indian community will be marginalised by being allocated just 27 seats (38%) in parliament, although they constitute 46% of the population. Urban Fijians will be similarly under-represented. Conservative Eastern provincial regions will receive a disproportionate number of seats, at the expense of indigenous Fijians from the economically powerful, but politically weak Western regions. Lastly, voting will be strictly along racial lines.

For the coalition to win, they would need to record a national aggregate vote of at least 70%, and to capture eight seats not allocated to Indian voters. This seems unlikely. The recently published electoral boundaries have reproduced the constitutional gerrymander, giving the Labour Party little hope of victory in a handful of Fijian seats, even if they win a handsome aggregate vote.

For Labour though, one of the major factors yet to be considered seriously is the impact of Sitiveni Rabuka. He is now expected to get the blessing of the Great Council of Chiefs as President of Ratu Mara's newly-founded Fijian Political Party. This means that he could lead the party into the 1992 elections as the preferred candidate of the chiefs, but with a populist mantle, a mantle that up to now has been worn by the Labour Party. Conversely, it could be that Rabuka's conversion to a less extreme view of Fiji's future could legitimise the Labour Party's 1987 vision of a multi-racial Fiji in the eyes of enough voters to give them the parliamentary backing they need to mount a future challenge.

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