Is There Still Hope In Fiji?

For the first time since Fiji’s coup of 14 May, there may be a glimmer of hope for a political solution that will not hurl the nation back into the Dark Ages. The compromise arising from the Great Council of Chiefs’ meeting in late July, while far from satisfactory, represents a defeat for extreme racists from the Taukei Movement.

The decision came amidst continuing civil disorder and harassment by the military, along with pressure from Taukei extremists, to have Fiji declared a republic, pre-colonial laws reinstated and non-indigenous Fijians stripped of their political rights.

The Taukei had succeeded in pushing their ideas through nine of the fourteen provincial councils that represent rural-dwelling indigenous Fijians, with the other five councils that represent rural-dwelling indigenous Fijians taking only slightly more moderate positions. They had gone so far as to design a flag for the new republic (based on the colours of the military) and went into the Council of Chiefs’ meeting optimistic that a republic was about to be declared and that a new parliament would be completely in the hands of indigenous Fijians.

Resistance to the extreme Taukei position, however, has been growing throughout Fijian society. Supporters of the overthrown Bavadra government focused their efforts on maintaining economic sanctions against the military-backed regime, while Bavadra and his colleagues sought to negotiate with the Governor-General.

A small, open economy such as Fiji’s is extremely vulnerable, and the economic consequences of the coup were felt immediately. The two main income earners, sugar and tourism, became the focal points of conflict between supporters of the military regime and those backing the Bavadra government. Tourist arrivals dropped off drastically after the coup, with the hotel occupancy rate falling to around 10% in June. Meanwhile, with the sugar cane harvest about to begin, cane growers and cutters refused to harvest.

The effects were felt throughout the economy. Hotels account for a large percentage of electricity usage and, by June, consumption was reported to have dropped by 50% nation-wide. Consumption of petroleum products declined by 30%. Large numbers of workers were laid off and many others faced reduced wages and hours.

Time was an important factor with the economic struggle. Australia provides the bulk of Fiji’s tourists and the important Australian school holiday period was about to begin in July. The sugar crop was under added threat by a severe drought that was causing the cane to dry out even faster than normal. Foreign reserves had been F$160 million on the eve of the coup and, by the end of the third week of June, they stood at F$113 million.

At the request of the Fiji Trades Union Congress, unions in Australia and New Zealand had imposed cargo and passenger bans on Fiji. Strong pressure was brought to bear from many directions to have them ended. Bans were lifted on necessary food and medical supplies, timber exports and the movement of Australian passengers over the course of several weeks, but many of the bans remained in place.

The regime launched “Operation Bounceback” in an attempt to lure tourists to Fiji. This included lobbying the travel industry and cutting airfares on the national airline, Air Pacific. Bavadra supporters responded by publicising potential dangers and inconveniences facing would-be tourists. Rapes, robberies and other forms of violence had increased substantially, with some tourists being among the victims.

Operation Bounceback was a partial success and hotel occupancy rates during the school holiday period did increase (to around 25%). But the amount of money that this put back into the economy was limited by the “leakage factor” that was normal to the industry and by the heavy discounting of airfares and accommodation.

The threat to the sugar crop was a much more serious problem because of its greater importance to the economy as a whole. Almost constant intimidation, including passage of severe Emergency Regulations, had failed to force the majority of cane growers to harvest their cane. Negotiations between representatives of the growers and the government were stalled over financial issues, and sentiment among growers against the regime remained strong.
A small amount of sugar was harvested towards the end of June and two of Fiji’s four mills began crushing, but actions by mill workers (including sabotage of equipment and walkouts over harassment by the military) soon forced the mills to shut down. Only enough cane had been produced for one month’s local consumption.

A particular concern for Taukei and other pro-coup elements has been continued opposition to them from within indigenous Fijian society. Two sources of opposition are especially noteworthy: liberal members of the Methodist church and regional antagonism.

Approximately two-thirds of indigenous Fijians belong to the Methodist Church and its influence within Fijian society is considerable. A group of church leaders had backed the Taukei Movement even before the coup, the most prominent being Tomasi Raikivi (Secretary of the Fiji Council of Churches), but many influential members of the church had been highly critical of its racism and violence. Raikivi (who is presently information adviser to the Governor-General) was forced to resign his position with the Council of Churches after leading anti-Indian demonstrations.

The President of the Methodist Church, Josateki Koroi, and other church leaders, issued a statement condemning the coup on the day that it took place. Since then, many church leaders have supported efforts to return the country to democracy. In a letter to the Fiji Sun on 9 July, with the title “Klaus Barbie & Fiji”, the Rev. Akuila Yabaki, Communication Secretary of the Methodist Church, wrote “Racism is a heresy against God whether it is Nazi Germany, South Africa or Fiji” and commented that “The links with recent events in Fiji is perhaps uncomfortably close” with those in Nazi Germany.

The most recent development is the emergence of the “Back to Early May” movement. Among those behind it are a number of important figures in the church, including Daniel Mastapha (the former president of the Methodist Church who resigned from the Council of Advisers after its first meeting) and Akuila Yabaki. It has called on the Governor-General “to return to our present constitution and to re-summon the dissolved parliament” and “to order all troops to return to barracks and to restore full charge of public order to the courts and the police”.

The regional factor is extremely important among indigenous Fijians, and the victory of the Bavadra-led coalition was seen by many as a victory against the chiefly eastern establishment. The coup, therefore, was seen as a move by this same group to regain control of the government. After being released on 19 May, Bavadra quickly moved to the safety of his home village in western Fiji and it was in the west that the strongest signs of resistance emerged. There was soon talk of
secession, or of setting up a government in exile in the west. On 4 June, 500 native Fijians from the west were stopped from visiting the Vunivalu (or high chief) Ratu George Cakobau by a group of eastern Fijians and the military.

Another potential source of opposition is the army itself. To carry out the coup, those planning it had to step over a number of senior officers. Since the return of Epeli Naulatikau (the former commander of the army) from Australia on 29 May, speculation has been rife about a counter-coup. Naulatikau has been highly critical of the Taukei Movement and, in a long newspaper interview, discussed the need to "cleanse" the army of those involved in the coup once democracy was restored.

The Taukei have sought to bolster their support among indigenous Fijians by appeals to racist sentiments and promotion of tradition. They have done so at meetings around the country, over the radio and through the Fijian language newspapers. They have prepared documents denouncing democracy as an imported idea counter to Fijian traditions and linking the survival of indigenous Fijian culture with loyalty to the chiefs.

Soldiers and police associated with the military-backed regime have sought to counter resistance by increased intimidation. Networks of informers have been promoted, and harassment, threats and the arrest of those known or even suspected of opposing the regime have become commonplace. The army has grown in size since the coup and plans are afoot to purchase additional weapons. Soldiers are to be seen everywhere and they occupy many sites considered to be of strategic importance. Steps are being taken to establish battalion-strength garrisons at several points around the country. Most recently, Colonel Rabuka has begun recruiting members to a special counter-insurgency unit.

Shortly before the Council of Chiefs' meeting, Bavadra and the Governor-General were able to negotiate a settlement that allowed the Coalition members of the Constitutional Review Committee to begin taking part in the exercise. At around the same time, unions in Australia and New Zealand decided to lift their bans, and sugar growers in Fiji agreed to begin the sugar harvest.

Several factors were important in shaping the decision finally made by the council. Among them was Colonel Rabuka's unwillingness to advocate breaking ties with the Queen. This was crucial in undermining the Taukei initiative and indicated the degree of unease among many conservative Fijians about taking what, for them, was such a drastic step. Also significant was the fact that a number of individuals known to be critical of the coup were allowed to participate. Such people had been kept out of the meeting held shortly after the coup. This time, although attempts were
made to silence Bavodra and his allies at the meeting, they were able to state their position. Others who did not support the Taukei extremist position were willing to speak out as well, and a negotiated compromise became necessary.

Fiji now awaits the outcome of deliberations by the Constitutional Review Committee and the establishment of some form of government of national unity that is to be formed in its wake. Extremist elements associated with the Taukei Movement are likely to continue to try to stop this process, since it appears unlikely that it will result in creation of the kind of state they advocate. While they would appear to have little chance of succeeding, the possibility of bringing about an equitable solution for the people of Fiji remains in doubt. Certainly the Council of Chiefs' proposal, with its communally exclusive basis for voting, remains unsatisfactory to many. Nevertheless, opposition to the Taukei and their allies has become more vocal and better organised, and further negotiation and compromise is a strong possibility.

The forces of racism and violence unleashed by the May coup are still considerable and returning the army to an apolitical role will not be easy, but at last there may be some room for optimism.

Michael C Howard

The Kinnock Factor

By the end of the recent British general election campaign, Labour leader Neil Kinnock had almost lost his voice, but he had not cracked. Although the Labour Party made a net gain of only 20 seats, Kinnock himself emerged with dignity — a bigger figure on the national stage than he had been before and one who, half-way through the campaign, had given the Conservatives the jitters.

His biggest single achievement was this: he came close to suggesting that there was an electable alternative to Thatcherism. He did not pull it off, but it certainly flickered across Britain's national consciousness that a party seeking to promote a fairer society could win.

This is not the place to discuss why he failed, save to observe that there were too many obstacles stacked against him, including the divided opposition. The question is whether he has sufficient qualities to win in future.

Kinnock is, by any standards, an unusual man. It is peculiar to be at times the best orator in the country and, at others, to be among the world's worst wafflers. At times he preaches egalitarianism, yet at others becomes lyrical about the virtues of the meritocracy. One wonders what he would have been like if he had been at the University of Oxford, not Cardiff. More like a Thatcher than Aneurin Bevan, perhaps? Or another Harold Wilson?

When he opted for the non-nuclear defence policy, it looked like an act of conscience with bravado thrown in. He went even further than the bulk of the Labour Party had seriously demanded in seeking to

Kinnock: Labour's fifth PM?