

South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

[Home](#) > THUGGERY IN FIJI

THUGGERY IN FIJI

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 09/21/2012 - 18:49

S.Chandrasekharan.

20.5.2000

On May 19 George Speight, son of an opposition member stormed Fiji's parliament while in session with an armed gang and took hostage of the elected prime minister of Indian origin Mahendra Choudhry and seven other ministers. Speight declared that he was taking over the country "on behalf of every individual member of the indigenous Fijian community".

It all started with the government giving permission to the opposition to take out a rally to protest against the policies of the government. The crowd expected to be a thousand swelled into more than Fifteen thousand. While the Police mostly Fijians could not control the crowd, the criminal elements went on a rampage destroying shops and property of Indo Fijians. At this time, George Speight entered the Parliament at 10.25 A.M. with a few armed men, fired their weapons to terrorise and took the Prime Minister and his ministers as hostage. The opposition members and the people in the gallery were allowed to go out unharmed.

Only around 10 P.M. in the night the Army entered the city to help control the rioting, arson and looting. A two-week curfew has been declared. George Speight has threatened to kill the hostages if any action is taken to rescue the hostages. There are reports that he has anointed himself as the Prime minister with nine ministers.

Mahendra Chaudhry with his cabinet and others are held captive in a small room and are all huddled up with no space even to stretch

The Indo Fijians are placing their hopes on their President Ratu Mara and Rabuka who has now become the Chairman of the "The Great Council of Chiefs" an important and respected post in a society where tribal loyalties to the chiefs are still dominant..

Rabuka's role in this incident is not clear. He is close to Speight's father who is an opposition MP. Rabuka was also seen moving in and out of the Parliament building after the attempted coup. If he is playing a mediatory role it is good for Fiji Indians as he is in a position to persuade Speight to give up the hostages.

It was just a year ago that the Fiji Labour Party headed by Mahendra Chaudhry was swept to power with seventy percent of the seats in a democratically conducted elections with the support of People's Coalition consisting of the Fijian Association Party and the Party of National Unity.

Exactly thirteen years ago an Indo-Fijian dominated government was toppled in a military coup led by the then Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. After ruling for twelve years, Rabuka gave in and elections under a new constitution was held. The new Constitution gave almost equal weightage to both the races the indigenous Fijians and Indians of Fijian origin.

The Indian community itself split into two with the National Federation Party aligning itself with Rabuka against the Labour Party of Mahendra Chaudhry.

At one stage, Fijians of Indian origin made up more than fifty percent of the population. But after the 1987 coup a large number of well to do Indo Fijians migrated to Australia and New Zealand and at the moment the Indo Fijians form 44 percent, the indigenous Fijians 51 percent and the rest from other races, forming 800,000 in all.

The Indians were brought as indentured labour from 1874 to 1920 and even now many of them live in the interior in the sugar plantations. A considerable number have gone into business and are economically better off than the indigenous Fijians. Many of the glittering shops of the Indians in Suva were therefore the targets of the rioters in the recent incident.

Ever since the 1987 coup, racial tension between the local Fijians of Melanesian origin and the Fiji-Indians has become a political issue. It was thought that the new constitution which gave an even opportunity for both races would finally push this small island nation towards a multi racial democracy with both the races living at peace with each other. But this was not to be.

The developments in Fiji are a lesson to other regions where people of Indian origin are in large numbers. From Guayana where the Indian population are virtually terrorised to those in Mauritius where they dominate, it is essential that the people of Indian origin learn to get along with other races in their own interest.

Indian Response:

In the last coup of 1987, when the Indian High Commission was bundled out of Suva there was total helplessness. There was no help either from Australia or New Zealand who had some leverage over Fiji. It took almost twelve years for the Commonwealth to put combined pressure on Rabuka to relent and bring about a more equitable political system where the interests of both the races the Fijian(Melanesian) and Indian were taken care of.

Fiji is not Maldives where India did intervene to prevent similar unscrupulous elements from ousting President Gayoom.

India will have to work through political and diplomatic channels and evolve a consensus among the Common wealth countries to deal with such problems like Fiji. Besides Australia and New Zealand, the United Kingdom in view of its long association has a constructive role to play. The USA has already condemned the attempted coup and the State Department is said to be watching the situation. Fiji is totally dependent on other countries for its well being. If there are no buyers for its sugar and textiles, its economy will be in ruins. Here is an opening that could be exploited.

India will have to think of a long term plan to deal with such situations like Fiji. Proportion wise people of Indian origin are less in Trinidad-Tobago. Yet Basdeo Pandey came to power on a voting pattern that cut across racial lines. As Prime minister he seems to be doing well in bringing about a rapprochement between the two races. This is not the case in Suriname, Guyana or even in Mauritius. The situation is no better in some of the African countries like Tanzania and Zambia.

People of Indian origin are loth to get into the security structure of their home countries. They are more keen to engage themselves in commerce or go for white collar jobs. In Fiji for example there are hardly any Indo Fijian in the Army or Police. This has to change.

We take pride in the people of Indian origin doing well in their respective countries and there is considerable interaction between NGOs in India and the PIOs of those countries. A separate department for PIOs has also been created in the Ministry of External Affairs for the PIOs for deepening the linkages in education, culture, science and technology. In doing so India has to be politically correct and in our enthusiasm one should not to forget that the top most priority in those countries is **racial amity**.

Extension of scholarships, educational facilities, officially sponsored visits etc could be thought of for Non PIOs also in such countries. There could be a well structured economic relationship that would benefit the people as a whole rather than being restricted to the Indian community.

It is in this connection that the question of "dual citizenship" to PIOs has to be reviewed. Apart from legal problems, such a move by the Indian government would further alienate the Indian origin people from the locals. Do we have to do it when India is in no position to influence the political events in those countries?

Category:

Notes [1]

Countries:

Fiji [2]

Copyright ©2012. All Rights are Reserved.

Source URL: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/note93>

Links

[1] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/notes>

[2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/fiji>