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[Home](#) > MORE ON FIJI: Getting curiouser and curiouser

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## MORE ON FIJI: Getting curiouser and curiouser

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The hostage crisis has entered the fourteenth day with no solution in sight. Thirty hostages are still holed up and there are reports that Mahendra Chaudhry is sick due to exhaustion. His personal Physician is attending on him. Of the nine ministers held along with Chaudhry one is the daughter of President Tau Mara. Another is Ganesh Chand, the local government minister who was brought out for a meeting with Speight. It is not known what transpired. Ganesh Chand is an active politician, popular with both Indo Fijians and the local Fijians.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> May Speight's supporters marched to the TV studios in the city and ransacked it. On their way they damaged Indian business houses in a selective manner and shot one Police Officer. This happened while the army was negotiating with Speight for the release of the hostages.

At this stage Commodore Frank Bainimarama took over the Presidentship by a decree. By another decree the 1997 Constitution which brought Mahendra Chaudhry to power was abrogated. Commodore. Bainimarama has given himself three years (sounds familiar) to bring in a new Constitution and install a representative government. Latest reports indicate that Ratu Mara has left Suva for his native island of which he is a local chief.

All reports indicate Speight to be an unstable character. Most of his demands have been met including the abrogation of 1997 constitution, removal of Ratu Mara and amnesty for himself and his men. The appointment of an interim prime minister, a retired general and son-in-law of

Ratu Mara was also cancelled at his instance and other names suggested by the military President were also rejected by him. The latest demand is to have his men appointed as ministers in the interim government. Speight had earlier rejected the offer of Ratu Mara to appoint him as Prime minister for six months while he wanted a term of one year. In his latest statement he declared that he resorted to hostage taking "in order to steer Fiji in the direction of Fijian supremacy".

Speight a graduate from Australia was appointed as Chairman of two government companies but was sacked by the Chaudhry government and thus has a personal grudge against Chaudhry. He lost his job in a private company subsequently for alleged financial irregularities.

Speight has to be handled carefully as he is fully capable of shooting Mahendra Chaudhry which he said he would do to his friend on the first day when his men stormed the parliament. Perhaps the Methodist church leaders could handle him better.

The immediate need is to maintain law and order and get the hostages released. On 31<sup>st</sup> May in between two military check posts Speight's supporters stopped Indian cab drivers and other Indians travelling in cars and relieved them of all their belongings. Mahendra Chaudhry's personal residence "Dilkusha" has already been damaged.

It is now becoming increasingly clear that the Taukei movement ( Fiji for Fijians ) is openly involved in the coup. Soon after the hostage taking Taukei leader Ratu Tevita Bolobolo called upon the President Ratu Mara to resign and said "We hereby state that we fully support the abolition of the 1997 constitution and warn Ratu Mara that any intervention by force will lead to all out civil war."

It is no coincidence either that the procession permitted by the government on the fateful day of May 19<sup>th</sup> was that of the Taukei movement. The processionists indulged in vandalism and selective attack of Indian shops while Speight's men took advantage of the confusion to enter the Parliament and take the Prime minister and others as hostages. ([See our note "Thuggery in Fiji" \[1\]](#)). The Taukei movement itself was and continues to be closely aligned to the powerful Methodist church. At one stage during Rabuka's regime there was a powerful plea to declare Fiji a Christian country. One may recall that one of the notorious decrees of Rabuka was "Sunday Observance decree" by which all Fijians including Indo Fijians were not to indulge in sports, travel, shopping or swimming on Sundays.

The Methodist church has still a role to play to bring the crisis to an end.

The Indian government has at last been galvanised to send a senior official of the External Affairs ministry to Australia and New Zealand. Indian intelligence can take some satisfaction that the Australian Intelligence was taken unawares of the present crisis just as it happened in 1987. It is not clear what intelligence inputs the Indian intelligence gave to the government after Chaudhry's taking over when the indigenous Fijians continued to have feelings of insecurity and the Taukei movement had reared its head again.

As said before Australia and New Zealand are in a position to influence events in Fiji to some extent. In terms of trade, Australia and New Zealand dominate with more than two thirds of the trade and the rest with US, Japan, EEC and surprisingly Myanmar.

By any account Indo Fijians have lost. Greater loss is the cause of democracy. It is for Australia and UN to ensure that justice is done to the hapless Indians. There is no exodus of Indo Fijians as such now. This is attributed to the decision taken by all representatives of the countries in Suva not to issue visas!

Hostage crisis may be solved soon, but racial harmony would need a much longer time after the present crisis.

**Category:**

Notes [2]

**Countries:**

Fiji [3]

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**Links**

[1] <file:///C:/Users/Sid/Desktop/saag/www/notes/note93.html>

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

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