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FIJI: A Military Coup Averted?

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In the last Talanoa session held towards the end of February 2004, both Prime Minister Qarase and Fiji Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry, surprisingly agreed that the three major problems facing the country namely, the land crisis, amendments to the Constitution and restructure of the sugar industry need amicable and quick solutions. But what they failed to mention, but must have been uppermost in their minds was how to control the army and how to avoid coups in a coup ridden country like theirs.

The threat of Coup:

It all began with the Home ministry taking preliminary steps to find a suitable substitute to replace the present Military Commander Voreqe Bainimarama whose term was expiring in February end.

Commander Bainimarama had made it clear that his was not a "contract appointment " to be terminated after the expiry of the contract and that he would continue so long as the cases relating to 2000 Coup are completed and disposed off. Frequent statements were made to the media in violation of the accepted norms in such sensitive issues by Army Spokesmen.

There were reports that the commander had called his senior officers earlier and obtained their pledge of support to him.

The Home ministry not to be outdone continued to express its misgivings openly about the army and the Principal Assistant Secretary Defence Peni Lomaloma went to the extent of declaring that the Ministry of Home Affairs is monitoring the developments in the Fiji Military Forces for the sake of national security. The army in turn said that it was military's role to monitor national security and not that of the Home ministry.

Surprisingly Prime Minister who should have intervened early to stop the war of words between the Army and the Home ministry, avoided the issue. It may be recalled that Qarase owes a debt of gratitude to Bainimarama for appointing him as head of the interim administration after the 2000 coup.

The procedure relating to the appointment of a commander of the army is clear under the constitution. The President makes the appointment on the advice of the Minister of Home Affairs. In working, the commander comes under the President who is the supreme commander and also under the minister of Home affairs who has the responsibility in the cabinet for the army.

To make it appear as if there is no crisis, Qarase went on the national radio and television to deny that there was any rift between the army and the government!

Another noteworthy issue was that the present commander was supported in his extension by one no less than Rabuka, a past master in coups and now a member of the Great Council of Chiefs.

In the end, Bainimarama got five years' extension as chief from March 1. Interestingly after accepting his appointment he thanked the President and pledged his loyalty and support to the President and the government. This happened not before but after his appointment!

The chief executive of Home affairs Jeremaia Waqanisau lost his home ministry job and sent into exile as Fiji's ambassador to China!

The moral of the story is- in Fiji, the political leaders should stop infighting and work towards strengthening democracy lest the "big daddy" takes over. This would apply to many countries and there is also a responsibility of the bigger countries in the region and outside to ensure that those "coup prone" countries are helped to find a viable structure for a stable democracy instead of supporting such dictators in their own supposed national interest!

The Sugar Industry and issues relating to land:

The Qarase government appears to be seized of the immediate need to do something for the ailing sugar industry, the mainstay of the country's economy and the livelihood of most of the Indo Fijians. A five-member technical team from India arrived on January 27 to study the sugar industry. They looked into all aspects of the industry including accounting, finance, farming and transport sectors. The team made a presentation to the Prime minister Qarase on February 4 to revitalize the ailing industry.

Qarase revealed that the government was planning to make a special cane payment to farmers to assist the farmers for meeting the educational expenses of their children.

On the issue of sugar there appeared to be unanimity between the government and the opposition labour party. A motion before the House of representatives to extend a loan of 75 million dollars to the Fiji Sugar Corporation was passed unanimously.

There is some move on the land issue also as some landowners have been persuaded to renew leases to cane farming families for another 30 years. Such extensions have been few but yet this is a good beginning and with the active support of leaders of all factions it could pick up.

Constitution review:

Prime Minister Qarase is very keen to set up a constitutional review commission. His objective is to make changes in the constitution which includes the provisions for a multi party cabinet and the electoral system. Fiji Times report mentions that the first stage would consist of routine non controversial issues like clarity in the application of the constitution while the second stage would be more substantial, touching on the electoral act and the multi party cabinet.

The appeal on the multi party cabinet filed by the government before the Supreme Court is not likely to be taken up for three months. It looks that decision either way may not have any relevance as the next elections will be due in 2006.

A word of caution has been injected by the NFP leader Prem Singh who said that the 1997 Constitution is a product of wide-ranging consultations, dialogue and consensus and any tinkering would raise serious objections about the Government's real intentions. His approach would be to use the "Talanoa" process to achieve goodwill, consensus and mutual trust between the two parties (Mahendra Chaudhry's and Qarase's) in such serious matters. Where is the goodwill for a consensus when both the leaders are fighting their positions in the courts?

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