

[Fiji Coup Sparks Attacks On Hindus](#)

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Military troops are keeping the peace in Fiji after the worst violence in 17 years of independence. Five days after a military coup collapsed, ethnic Fijian mobs turned violent. A Hindu temple and a Moslem mosque were stoned, Indians were attacked in their shops and in the streets, and 50 were injured during protests for a return to Fijian rule in the South Pacific nation. The situation remains unstable, with the safety and even the future of Fiji's 350,000 Indians (75% Hindu) remaining in doubt.

In a non-violent takeover on May 14, Lt. Col. Sitiveni Rabuka marched into Fiji's Parliamentary Chambers and declared military rule, arresting Prime Minister Timoci Bavadra and his Cabinet and confining them in barracks near the capitol city of Suva. The coup followed a month of tension between native Fijians (47%) and ethnic Indians (49%). Elections in April set Bavadra and his Indian-dominated coalition in power, dissolving Fijian rule for the first time.

Lt. Col. Rabuka, a Christian and Fiji's number three man in the military who said he led the coup to end ethnic tensions, demanded 40 of 52 seats in the House of Representatives for native Fijians, ignoring the Indian majority.

Indians reacted with a general strike, locking up shops and inventories, sparking panic and causing a run on the Fijian dollar which forced banks to close.

Declaring the military takeover illegal a few days later, Governor-General Ratu Sir Panaia Ganilau announced he was in control as Supreme Executive and representative of the British Crown in the Commonwealth nation. He called for new general elections. Ganilau ordered Prime Minister Bavadra and his Cabinet released, and established an interim Council of Ministers. In an effort to mend ethnic relations, Ganilau named Rabuka to chair the temporary government. But

the Great Council of Chiefs, the strongest voice on matters of Fijian welfare with a right to direct access to the Crown since 1874, denounced the Governor-General's support of Rabuka's military regime, a course that, if pursued, could cause Fiji's expulsion from the British Commonwealth. Unconfirmed rumors in the San Francisco Fijian community are that the Fijian Chiefs have formed, or intend to form, their own government and appoint a new Prime Minister rather than continue Rabuka's government.

The Governor General named Bavadra and his Deputy Prime Minister, Hari Sharma, were invited to the council, but both declined to serve. They maintain that they are in charge and the Governor General has no authority to dissolve the government. They intend to pursue their case in the courts. Bavadra has reportedly requested help from both Australia and New Zealand.

Commonwealth Countries Respond

Meanwhile, Australia and New Zealand refuse to recognize the new regime. They have urged citizens not to travel to Fiji, positioning warships to evacuate their several thousand nationals if necessary. Australia has five ships in the area now and is moving a sixth into position; New Zealand has one off-shore now. Militarily, there is no contest-Fiji has no ships and half of Fiji's miniscule 2,000 man army is on peace-keeping duties in the Middle East.

The Australians consider a Grenada-style attack beneath them and Australian Prime Minister Hawke quite early publicly ruled out military action. However, he strongly denounced the takeover, saying Rabuka "committed an illegal assault of Fiji's democratic process." Hawke said he supports the Bavadra government and regards the interim council as "completely unacceptable."

The most likely course of persuasive action on the part of Australia and New Zealand is economic. As the major regional powers and Fiji's main trading partners, the two countries have considerable clout. Fiji would run out of rice and wheat in a mere ten days if Australia stopped exports to the island.

India has also moved to help resolve the situation, sending special envoy Eduardo Faleiro to Australia for talks aimed at restoring democracy "as soon as possible." Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has expressed his great concern in a letter to Australia's Government. It is unclear, aside from a trade embargo, what the Commonwealth countries might do. With such a problem in their front yard, they may have to reconsider the "Grenada solution" they previously disdained.

Community Reaction

The large San Francisco Fijian community has formed the "Committee for Democracy in Fiji," with Wahid Ali, an Indian Muslim from Fiji, as the president. A meeting of 2,000 Indian Fijians was being held May 23rd in Fremont to discuss the problems.

Ali and others report that there are night time attacks with rocks on Indian homes. Generally fearful, the Fijian Indian community is staying indoors. The Indian editor of a national newspaper declined to discuss the situation, warning Hinduism Today his phone might be bugged. Jay Nijjor, of Fiji Market in San Bruno, said that relations have been good between the communities and he considers the potential for violence to be limited.

Many U.S. Fijians put the blame on former Prime Minister Mara, saying he just was unable to "stand loosing the election." Nijjor told Hinduism Today that Mara must have planned the coup well in advance. Both the first and second commanders of the Army had been sent out of the country, leaving Rabuka (third-in-command) in charge. Just before the elections the Indian Commissioner of Police, P.V. Raman, was removed from office by Mara, leaving all the armed forces of the country in the control of Fijians. Ali pointed out that Mara showed no intentions to hold onto his office after losing the election-Mara dutifully "cleaned out his desk" and departed. But, Ali added, all the ousted politicians may have supported the coup to regain their comfortable government jobs.

Fiji's stability since independence has relied upon a balance of the Indian's economic power and the ethnic Fijian's political power. By constitutional arrangement, all of the land is owned by native Fijians, who lease it to the Indians or others. Yet, 95% of the small businesses are owned by Indians, while the largest

sugar mills and much of the flourishing tourist industry is owned by Australians, Englishmen and others. This workable arrangement kept everyone happy until the last election. Natural increase in population, and defection of some ethnic Fijians from their traditional political party, made possible the Indian political victory—a most unexpected result. After the election, the ethnic Fijians—including the ones who voted for Bavadra—suddenly realized they might lose their land-monopoly and other privileges.

Presently, the basic thrust of the ethnic Fijians urges a return to that happy balance. But now that the paradisaical island has lost its simple ways through a full-fledged military coup, it may never return again to its former innocence. The situation of the Indians, most of whom are Hindus, remains unsettled.

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