

Osama shadow over Comoran island siege

Moroni (Grande Comore),
December 19

A GROUP of about 20 masked gunmen including several White people landed on the Comoran island of Moheli on Wednesday, taking control of parts of the capital and clashing with local soldiers, officials said.

Government officials dismissed rumours that the incident in the coup-prone Indian Ocean archipelago was a US assault on possible followers of Osama bin Laden. Officials said the force had seized control of the police station and telecommunications office and cut phone lines from Moheli.

The Prime Minister on the main island of Grande Comore said his Government had sent troops to counter the incursion, which is as an attempt to destabilise the Government of the Muslim country of 700,000.

Prime Minister Hamada Madi Bolero said there had been fighting outside the gendarmerie in the morning after his troops arrived, with one of his men wounded and one of the invading force killed.

The Comoran islands have seen a succession of military coups since independence from France in 1975. There have been a number of coup attempts this year alone in the run-up to a referendum planned for next Sunday to approve a new constitution aimed at ending a long-running secessionist crisis on the islands.

Diplomats on Grande Comore said the gunmen landed by speedboat. "In the morning, a group of about 20 masked and armed men disembarked from a speedboat onto the island of Moheli," said Francisco Madeira, special envoy to the Comoros of the Organisation of African Unity. "These people have taken control of the gendarmerie and they have taken some gendarmes hostage," he said.

Diplomats said the gunmen had distributed leaflets linking Comoran military strongman Colonel Azaly Assoumani with the al-Qaida network, and there were rumours that the forces could be US soldiers hunting for an al-Qaida cell on Moheli.

Reuters

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

20 DEC 2001

Fiji in limbo over multi-racial govt

REUTERS

SUVA, SEPTEMBER 11

FIJI appeared to be in political limbo on Tuesday with new nationalist Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase saying he didn't need to talk to his rival, ethnic Indian Mahendra Chaudhry, about the new Cabinet line-up. Qarase won 31 seats in the 71-seat parliament in last month's elections and was obliged under the multi-racial constitution to invite Chaudhry, who won 27 seats, to join his government.

Asked if he and Chaudhry had agreed on a line-up, Qarase said: "No." He added: "I don't have to talk to Chaudhry about who is in my Cabinet." Qarase is expected to announce his Cabinet on Wednesday and Parliament must sit within 30 days of the end of the election. Vote counting finished on Friday.

Chaudhry said in a statement he and his Labour Party had offered support to Qarase.

"But he seems undecided... Any further delay in setting up a government will put a question on Mr Qarase's ability to lead the nation." Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian Prime minister toppled by a racially inspired coup in 2000, shocked Fijians on Monday by accepting the invitation to join the government only hours after Qarase was sworn in.

Many in this ethnically divided nation question whether the two can work together. Qarase had earlier vowed never to serve in a Chaudhry government. "In the next few weeks the nation will know the true mettle of Laisenia Qarase and Mahendra Chaudhry," said the *Fiji Times* newspaper in an editorial.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Phil Goff said he hoped Qarase and Chaudhry could resolve their personal differences in the interest of peace and stability in Fiji. "Clearly what Fiji needs is a reconciliation between its different communities and I hope whatever solution its parties come up with, that will be at the forefront of their minds."

Qarase has said he is talking to all political parties, including coup leader George Speight's Conservative Alliance which won six seats in the poll. Speight won a seat but it is unclear whether he will ever sit in Parliament as he is in prison on treason charges.

In a brief court appearance in Suva on Tuesday, Speight said talks were scheduled between the extreme nationalist Conservative Alliance and Qarase's Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua party.

"It should be today," Speight said as he was escorted to a military bus for his journey back to his island prison off the capital Suva.

INDIAN EXPRESS

11 SEP 2001

BRUTE FORCE

Plot to keep Chaudhry out successful

IT is quite clear that indigenous Fiji opinion is quasi-unanimous in its view that an Indian should not become prime minister of their country. See what happened in March this year when the Court of Final Appeal upheld the ruling of a high court that the 1997 constitution, ordered the president to recall the parliament prorogued after Speight's coup in May last year. Instead of doing that, the President called a meeting of the Great Council of Chiefs, the assembly of Fiji traditional chieftains, who rejected the court's ruling. Mahendra Chaudhry called on the president and asked him to recall and dissolve the parliament and call for fresh elections, which proposal the President took to be an admission of lack of support, dismissed him, appointed another caretaker prime minister who, in effect, advised him to dissolve the parliament, thereby averting the risk of recalling it with unforeseeable consequences. The whole thing was managed by indigenous Fijians, for the benefit of indigenous Fijians.

It is also clear that Speight's coup has achieved its purpose of polarising political opinion in Fiji along ethnic lines. Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party, which had tried to build a pan-Fijian platform comprising people of all racial backgrounds, has now become a party of Fiji Indians. Most of the results are out, the FLP has around 27 seats — from the electorates reserved for Indians — and so has Laisenia Qarase's SDL. George Speight's Conservative Alliance has six. Chaudhry says he will stake claim to form the government, but it is unlikely that in the present climate he will get the support of the smaller Fijian parties, such as the Fijian Association Party, who helped him become prime minister in 1999. The FAP combined with two other Fijian parties in January this year, with the stated purpose of defending indigenous interests — against whom should be amply clear from the context. What is astonishing is that Chaudhry should be willing to shake hands with Speight, all is forgotten rather than forgiven, the man has not only lost his morale, but his moral authority and dignity as well. Qarase, of course, will seek and probably get Speight's cooperation in forming the government, in spite of the fact that the man is facing charges of treason — punishable by death — and was the author of a coup whose objectives, it has been revealed to the trial court, included blowing up the parliament building, distributing petrol bombs to Fijian youth, mounting systematic attacks on Indian businesses and homes and blowing up ships. Chaudhry has made allegations of election fraud, but that is for the group of international observers to decide. His own party is said to be no longer keen in having him as their leader. Moreover, the Indians themselves are afraid of more violence against them should Chaudhry form the government again. Brute force has spoken, it must be respected.

Political crisis grips Fiji again

Suva, September 10

FIJI WAS today plunged into a new political crisis only hours after Laisenia Qarase took office as Prime Minister, when his rival demanded his constitutional right to nearly half the seats in cabinet.

Qarase, who served as caretaker Prime Minister after the army imposed martial law following the May 2000 coup, earlier said a Government involving ousted Premier Mahendra Chaudhry would be unworkable.

Chaudhry, who has also said he could put together a Government, replied that Qarase might have to go back to President Josefa Iloilo, who swore him in on Monday as Prime Minister after week-long elections, and resign.

Chaudhry, the Pacific nation's first Indian Prime Minister overthrown in George Speight's coup on May 19 last year, said a multi-party coalition could be made to work "if there is a genuine commitment to make it work."

No party has emerged with a clear majority in the 71-seat parliament with Qarase's nationalist SDL becoming the single largest party with 31 seats.

Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party took 27 seats, Speight's conservative alliance Matanitu Vanua (MV) nationalist group got six and new Labour two. The United General Party and the National Federation Party got one each, and two independents were elected with one seat left vacant due to be decided at a by-election on September 19 following a candidate's death.



Laisenia Qarase (centre) is all smiles after being sworn in as Fiji's Prime Minister by President Ratu Josefa Iloilo (right) at a ceremony on Monday. Qarase's wife Leba is on his left.

Qarase said after his swearing-in that Speight's alliance wanted to join the Government and he had secured the support of two independents. But under Fiji's unusual constitution, originally intended to ensure all races have a voice in the Government, any party getting 10 per cent or more of the vote is entitled to a proportion of the 20 seats in cabinet.

Chaudhry said he wants 47 per cent of them, and angrily denied he was being politically obstructive. "The ... Constitution provides for a multi-party cabinet and it has set a thresh-

old at 10 per cent and any party reaching that threshold is entitled to be in Government," he argued.

Qarase may have to go back to the President and say he cannot form a Government and get the President to select somebody else. Or parliament, which has not yet sat, could be dissolved and new elections called, he said, without saying which option he preferred.

The heart of the problem is Fiji's thorny race issue — 51 per cent of Fiji's 832,494 people are indigenous Melanesians or Polynesians and 44 per cent

Indian. Former banker Qarase warned earlier in the day that if Chaudhry took up his right to seats "It will be a government that will not function properly." "It means that he will have to get about eight seats, get 12 and I have an obligation to give some to the smaller parties, say I give five, I end up with seven, so the numbers don't stack up and it will never work." Qarase, a Polynesian from the Lau Islands, has been sworn in three times in 16 months as Prime Minister but never after democratic elections.

AFP

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

11 SEP 2001

Many Indo-Fijians prepare to leave

By Amit Baruah

Islands

SUVA, SEPT. 9 Mr. Shalen Shandil is 23 years old. And today is his last day as a citizen of Fiji. Mr. Shandil, who is migrating to New Zealand, is one of the many Indo-Fijians who are abandoning their country of birth.

Mr. Shandil, a radio journalist, hopes that New Zealand will provide him with better prospects. Since 1987, when Mr. Sitiveni Rabuka staged his first coup since the country became independent in 1970, around one lakh Indo-Fijians have left the shores of this South Pacific island nation.

Like Mr. Shandil, they have left in pursuit of better prospects. In Fiji, ethnic Fijians continue their domination of the State structure. In the military, ethnic Fijians number 99.3 per cent, in the police force 75 per cent, and in civil bureaucracy, 70 per cent.

Like the others who have left Fiji, Mr. Shandil is educated and skilled. But for many other Indo-Fijians, wage labourers and ordinary workers, Fiji will remain their home. "I have contempt for those who are leaving. They are not real Indians. We have to live and die here. This is our home," Mr. Fayyaz Ali, a

taxi driver, told this correspondent.

The Indo-Fijian community, marginalised in the State structures, has little to clutch on to. The Mahendra Chaudhry Government led to the coup of May 2000, a sore point with ethnic Indians, whose vote for Mr. Chaudhry seems to be an effort at asserting their rights.

Ever larger number of Indo-Fijians have voted for Mr. Chaudhry's Labour Party in the August general elections, but there is little chance of their being able to assert their rights under a new Government that should be in place early next week. The former leader of the National Federation Party (NFP), Mr. Jai Ram Reddy, was one of those who helped in the passage of the 1997 Constitution, which restored the right of an Indian to become Prime Minister.

Today, the NFP is in the doldrums. While it got no seat in the May 1999 polls, it managed to get one in the just-concluded elections. Not many would like to be in the shoes of the NFP leadership these days.

Ironically, the power-sharing arrangement envisaged in the 1997 Constitution has fallen victim to the adversarial politics of the last few years. There appears to be little chance of res-

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toring the spirit of the Constitution.

What are the fears of the ethnic Indians? An Indo-Fijian policeman, who chose not to identify himself, was open in expressing his fears. "At midnight, there will be a knock on my door. The demand will be for matches. Or something else. I have to comply. Complaining is useless." Doesn't the fact that he is in the police help? "Not at all comes the reply. My complaint will not be addressed," he said.

There is little doubt that many Indo-Fijians feel that they are "less than citizens" in the land where they were brought as indentured labour or "girmityas".

Those like Mr. Shandil who can leave will do so. But others will remain. And they will want to be treated as full citizens of their country. Many of them have four generations born here and apart from watching Bollywood films and hearing Indian music, their connections with India are tenuous.

As some prepare to leave and others are resigned to stay, the ground realities dictate that Fijians and Indo-Fijians must live together as part of a process of give and take. The tragedy is that not many here are thinking on such lines.

10 SEP 2001

Blow to Speight's power hopes

Suva, September 8

A SMALL group of moderate and independent legislators emerged on Saturday as key players in building a governing coalition for Fiji, sources in the caretaker Prime Minister's indigenous Fijian political party said.

Laisenia Qarase's Fijian United Party, or SDL, emerged as the winner with 31 seats in a general election this week to return the Pacific Islands nation to democracy but the win left the party six seats short of the 37 needed to rule alone in the 71-seat Parliament.

SDL official Jale Baba said that talks with a group of four moderate legislators and two independents over forming a new coalition government were progressing well. By cutting a deal with the moderates, Qarase would be able to keep the hardline Nationalist Conservative Alliance out of government.

One of the alliance's six new lawmakers is George Speight, the jailed leader of a coup that unseated Fiji's first ethnic Indian Prime Minister in May 2000. Speight was elected from his prison cell, where he is awaiting trial on treason charges that carry the death penalty.

Sources said Qarase would prefer to govern with the moderate because the conservative alliance is demanding pardons



Fiji's interim Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase (second from left) arrives at a party meeting.

AP PHOTO

for Speight and his 12 fellow conspirators — a concession he does not want to make.

Alliance spokesman Sam Speight, George's brother, said the party was prepared to take up seats in the opposition if frozen out of a coalition.

The alliance also wanted key cabinet posts and a deputy prime minister's position, but the party is widely seen as unacceptable to the ethnic Indian community — which makes up

44 percent of Fiji's 8,20,000 population — and to Fiji's neighbours and major trading partners such as Australia and New Zealand.

Qarase would not accept "unrealistic" demands from the hardline conservative alliance, the official said.

"This country needs a (stable) government, and they (the moderates) have the choice of going with us or with (Mahendra) Chaudhry," he added.

Chaudhry, the former Prime

Minister whose government was ousted in May 2000, and his Fiji Labor Party won 27 seats, 10 fewer than in the 1999 election.

The final election tally left the SDL with 31 seats, the Fiji Labor Party 27 and the conservative alliance six. Two independents won seats, and three minor parties took a total of four seats.

Emphasizing Fiji's racial divide, Qarase and Chaudhry have ruled out governing together

AP

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

Fiji poised for ethnic Govt

Suva, September 6

CLAIMING VICTORY at the polls for indigenous Fijian parties, interim Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase has said the country would have a new coalition Government of Fijian lawmakers by early next week. He spoke as the combined seats of his Fijian United Party, or SDL and the extremist Conservative Alliance edged ahead of the ethnic Indian-dominated Fiji Labour Party for the first time since counting began on Monday in an election to return Fiji to democratic rule.

Former Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry's Labour Party was stalled early today at 25 seats after taking an early lead in the race for the 37 seats needed for a majority in the 71-seat parliament. Qarase's SDL, which has captured 21 seats, was poised to take another nine in northern Fiji, according to observers, while the Conserva-



AFP PHOTO

Mahendra Chaudhry keeps his chin up amid signs that a coalition of ethnic Fijians is headed for the seat of power.

tive Alliance had 6 seats. Observers said two independents and two of the three parties with just a single seat would support Qarase and work with

an SDL-led Government.

As vote counting began for a fourth day, 57 seats had been declared, with 14 still to be finalised. Qarase told the Associated Press in an interview he was confident of entering a coalition with the Conservative Alliance, whose legislators include George Speight, the leader of a coup that unseated Chaudhry 16 months ago. Speight won his seat from a prison cell, where he awaits trial for treason. Under Fiji law candidates can seek election so long as they have not been convicted. "We will make the numbers" and "form a Government quite comfortably ... In association with some other parties," Qarase said. Negotiations on a coalition agreement with other indigenous Fijian parties were well advanced and will be resolved by the weekend, he added. He is expected to name his cabinet lineup by Tuesday.

While Labour analysts said

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the election remained a cliffhanger, with either main racial bloc still able to win, other Indian politicians conceded Chaudhry's bid to win back the Prime Minister's post had foundered.

New Federation party leader, Attar Singh, an ethnic Indian, said Qarase would take almost all the outstanding seats, with Labour picking up only another two of three. Under Fiji's constitution, any party with eight or more seats in parliament must be invited to join the cabinet, but Qarase is not expecting Labour's Chaudhry to take up the invitation. The offer, will "certainly not (be) a senior position." Qarase has made it clear he will not work with Chaudhry in any coalition arrangement.

The Labour leader was not immediately available for comment but was expected to speak after a Caucus meeting of his newly elected legislators later today.

AFP

INDONESIA TIMES

- 7 SEP 2001

Speight holds ace as Chaudhry trails

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Suva, Sept. 6 (Reuters): Detained coup leader George Speight emerged today as a powerbroker in Fiji after a vote along racial lines in the week-long election left the ethnic Indian Prime Minister he ousted trailing indigenous parties.

Fiji's indigenous interim Prime Minister said today he was ready to form a new coalition government and was in talks with independents and minor parties, including that of detained coup leader George Speight.

But Laisenia Qarase's deposed ethnic Indian predecessor Mahendra Chaudhry, toppled by Speight in May 2000, said there appeared to have been widespread vote rigging in last week's racially charged election and was considering a court challenge.

"We are ready to form the next government once we get a viable coalition," Qarase told a news conference as counting in the country's so far peaceful election entered the final stage.

"We will certainly be visiting the President early next week to explain our coalition and our stand," Qarase said.

Qarase said his party was "half way" through talks with all elected politicians except those from Chaudhry's Indian-based Fiji Labour Party (FLP).

Chaudhry said he was also trying to form a coalition after the election, which played out on



Chaudhry

racial lines. While he did not officially concede, it would be very difficult for him to cobble together a coalition with the predominantly indigenous independents and minor parties.

"I suspect there has been a widespread attempt to rig the vote and influence the result of the 2001 election," Chaudhry told a news conference in Suva less than an hour before Qarase said he was ready to form a government.

"The election has been won by fraud. We need to kill this practice in the bud or there will be no democracy in Fiji," Chaudhry told reporters in Suva, calling for an investigation.

Chaudhry alleged that some polling clerks deliberately invalidated FLP votes and said he was considering a court challenge of

election results.

There has been a very high informal vote in the election.

UN officials in Fiji to observe the election said they would not yet comment on Chaudhry's allegations. The UN observer mission issued a statement on Monday which said voting had been conducted "in a transparent manner".

Fiji was calm and quiet as the vote counting and coalition negotiations went on.

Both Chaudhry and Qarase have won 27 seats each in the 71-seat parliament.

Coup leader Speight emerged as an unexpected powerbroker as he sat on a prison island off Suva awaiting trial for treason.

Speight contested the election and won his seat and his ultra-nationalist Conservative Alliance won six seats in total, making it a key target for Qarase's coalition.

The alliance has told Qarase and Chaudhry that Speight and 12 associates charged with treason must be released and granted immunity for it join any government.

Australia and New Zealand urged a peaceful and united outcome, although New Zealand foreign minister Phil Goff said Speight should not be given immunity.

"Pardoning Mr Speight would send the wrong message to the world," he said.

PUL... 2001

- 7 SEP 2001

Fijian voters elect Speight, Chaudhry

SUVA: Former Fiji prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry of Indian origin and the coup plotter George Speight, who overthrew the country's democratically elected government last year, were elected to Parliament in a vote aimed at restoring democracy to the troubled South Pacific nation, election officials said on Wednesday.

Mr Chaudhry, who was Fiji's first ethnic Indian prime minister, won his district in the Indian stronghold in the west, they said.

Mr Chaudhry's Labour Party took 22 of the 45 seats announced by afternoon.

Mr Speight also won a seat in the legislature, 16 months after he and a gang of gunmen stormed its debating chamber to overthrow Mr Chaudhry's democratically elected government.

Mr Speight narrowly won the Tailevu North Fijian communal seat for the conservative alliance, a nationalist party demanding that indigenous Fijians control political power in their homeland.

Speight supporters gathered at a school in Fiji's capital, Suva, danced and cheered when they heard the result.

Mr Speight remains in custody on an island off Suva awaiting trial on treason charges stemming from the coup. He faces a maximum death penalty if convicted. He was allowed to stand for election because he has never been convicted of a serious crime.

"All the hard work has paid off

today and words cannot express what this day means to the cause (of indigenous Fijians) that was fought for last year," Mr Speight's brother Sam said.

"It wasn't easy. As you know our candidate has not been able to campaign, so that was a big hurdle to overcome," he added.

Mr Chaudhry's main rival for power, military-installed interim Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, also won his seat, officials added.

Mr Qarase, an indigenous Fijian, immediately ruled out working with Mr Chaudhry.

"I'm not prepared to work with Mr Chaudhry. Either he forms the government, or I form the government," said Mr Qarase, leader of the SDL Party.

The two main indigenous Fijian parties shared 20 seats. Others were held by minor parties. Twenty-six seats are still being contested in the 71-seat Parliament.

Meanwhile, leaders of indigenous Fijian political parties resumed talks on forming a coalition government to try to prevent the Pacific nation's ethnic Indian minority from taking power following the general election. To hold power, a party or coalition must take 37 seats, which wins the right to appoint the next prime minister and form the new government—a majority of 36 seats is not enough because the parliamentary speaker is taken from the ranks of the largest party and cannot vote. (AP)



M. Chaudhry



George Speight

Chaudhry's chances of forming Govt. recede

By Amit Baruah

SUVA, SEPT. 5. Mr. George Speight, accused of treason for leading the May 2000 coup in Fiji, was elected to the country's Parliament from jail today as it became clear that Mr. Mahendra Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party (FLP) would find it difficult to form a government again.

The Soqosoqo Duavata Ni Telenivanua (SDL), led by the caretaker Prime Minister, Mr. Laisenia Qarase, and Mr. Speight's Conservative Alliance have put up a good showing — and together have won seats to be in sight of forming a possible coalition.

Mr. Chaudhry, ousted Prime Minister, retained his Ba Open seat while Mr. Qarase took the Lau Fijian Provincial seat. In the second round of counting, Mr. Speight defeated his nearest SDL candidate, polling 3,489 votes in the Tailevu North Fijian Communal seat.

Mr. Speight, who could lose his seat in Parliament if he is convicted or is unable to attend two sessions of the House of Representatives, had held Mr. Chaudhry and his Ministers hostage for 56 days from May 19, 2000, in the Parliament complex here. He appeared in a Suva court today.

Till late this evening, the Labour Party had secured 22 seats, the SDL 14, the Conservative Alliance six, and the National Federation Party, the New Labour Party (NLUP) and the Unit-



The ousted Fijian Prime Minister, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhry, waves to supporters at the Drasa Indian School in Lautoka, on Wednesday. (Right) The jailed coup leader, Mr. George Speight, is all smiles after bagging a seat in the elections. — AFP

ed General Party (UGP) one each in the 71-member House.

Meanwhile, in what seemed to be a precautionary measure, the Fijian military and police launched a combined exercise from 6 p.m. this evening to 6 a.m. tomorrow to test the "mobility and agility" of the security forces.

A police spokesman, Mr. Romanu Tikotikoca, said the security forces were also preparing a plan to protect the incoming Government. The military and police's interest was to ensure that the new Government served a full five-year term.

Pointing out that there was "nothing to worry about", Mr. Tikotikoca said the idea of the exercise, which would see

checkpoints being set up, had taken lessons from the 1987 coup in Fiji as well as the events of May, 2000.

Asked whether police and military would ensure the security of Mr. Speight if he were to be taken to Parliament to be sworn in, he said a court ruling would be required if the coup leader was to take oath as a member of Parliament.

At a separate briefing, the Elections Supervisor, Mr. Walter Riggamoto, said the turnout in the current elections was 77.86 per cent, a drop of 12 per cent compared to the 90 per cent voting in May, 1999. This comes despite the fact that voting in Fiji is compulsory.

Mr. Riggamoto, asked about possible court action against the high number of invalid votes, said it could have a bearing on the formation of a new government which should take place sometime next week.

On the political prospects, analysts say the current elections have led to extremist parties gaining prominence, while the consensus 1997 Constitution was about partnership between different ethnic groups. There can be problems ahead as Mr. Qarase has repeatedly said he will not work with Mr. Chaudhry. Under the 1997 Constitution, all parties which gain more than eight seats are entitled to berths in the Cabinet.

Analysts feel parties such as the SDL and the Conservative Alliance can form a government. While the SDL, led by Mr. Qarase, has made a strong bid for power, the Conservative Alliance of Mr. Speight is seen as the "dark horse".

If those, who believe in Fijian majoritarianism in principle, do take power, the possibility of changes in the consensus 1997 Constitution could arise. Mr. Qarase, for instance, has repeatedly said Fijians, despite being a majority here, had lost political power. In case Mr. Qarase is able to form a coalition government, it remains to be seen whether he acts on the opinions he has expressed.

Path not yet clear for Chaudhry

By Amit Baruah

SUVA, SEPT. 3. It has been a quiet election so far. Counting of ballot papers in Fiji's second election in two years, and a little over a year after the kidnapping of a Prime Minister, is slow.

At the Suva Grammar School, which overlooks the Pacific Ocean, there's almost a festival-like atmosphere. Parties have put up sheds outside the counting centre where the fate of 28 of a total of 71 constituencies will be decided.

Food stalls did brisk business this morning as party supporters sat in their sheds, waiting patiently for the process of sorting, and then finally, counting to begin.

There was no open rivalry, it's all very civilised and dignified. Even a university election in India could seemingly create more problems. And, by Indian standards, the Outer Delhi constituency, has many, many more times the total electorate of Fiji — 451,000.

For all the festive atmosphere, the elections here are serious. And, beneath the civilised polling process, which got its stamp of approval from the Common-

wealth observer mission and United Nations representatives today, there are real questions, issues and latent inter-community tensions.

The big question is whether the authorities will respect the people's verdict if the Indian-dominated Fiji Labour Party (FLP) of the deposed Prime Minister, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhry, gains a majority or is in striking distance of taking power? No one is sure.

The Fiji Times, has been stressing one point — that the poll results be respected. And, by doing so, it has authenticated doubts being expressed gently; that Mr. Chaudhry's path to power may not be smooth. In case the FLP, which had 37 seats in the May 1999 elections, and which is again expected to do well, crosses the 36-seat mark, keeping it away from power might prove a tall order.

But, in case it is unable to get a clear majority in Fiji's preferential vote system, the President, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, will have a lot of space to operate with. He might just call upon a Fijian leader to form a Government.

That the FLP is aware of such a prospect is clear. "There will cer-

tainly be hurdles (in forming a Government). The right-wing, reactionary forces will try to prevent us from taking power. We don't expect plainsailing," Dr. Ganesh Chand, FLP ideologue and former Planning Minister, said. However, Dr. Chand is "very confident" that the Labour Party, which has run an organised, issue-based campaign, will be able to form the Government once again.

Other analysts, too, say there are "problems" ahead as the election results begin trickling in. There are even suggestions that Mr. Chaudhry step back, and allow someone else from his party, an ethnic Fijian, to become Prime Minister.

So far, the international election observers have been pleased at the way things have gone. "We are pleased that the voting took place in such a calm and professional atmosphere. We are impressed with the professionalism and dedication of the election officials, especially the polling station staff," the Commonwealth Observer Group Chairman, Sir Henry Forde, said today. "So far the process has been credible, but it is not over yet. Now our attention will turn to the counting

press." The United Nations Fijian Electoral Observation Mission (UNFEOM) said its observers from 18 countries had visited some 95 per cent the 818 polling stations. "To date, the Mission has observed no problems significant enough to compromise the overall integrity of the voting process," it said in a statement.

"As it now turns its attention to the task of observing the counting process, the U.N. Mission expresses appreciation for the cooperation it has received from the people of Fiji and their officials."

"The United Nations mission looks forward to the realisation of Fiji's national determination to return to democratic rule," it added hinting that the polling process may have been the easy part of the election.

In the next couple of days, a clear picture of the winners and losers will be known. Until then, most people will continue to speculate about what kind of Government will rule for them.

One thing is clear — no one here wants a repeat of May 2000 — when Fiji's lawfully-elected Prime Minister was taken hostage for 56 days and shown the door.

THE HINDU

Chaudhry may opt for an ethnic Fijian

ASSOCIATED PRESS

SUVA, Sept. 1. — Mr Mahendra Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian Prime Minister, who was ousted in a nationalist coup, left open today the option of transferring power to a respected indigenous Fijian leader if his Labour Party wins office as expected in national elections.

Mr Chaudhry, who has previously been firm that he will return as Prime Minister despite opposition from President Josefa Iloilo and some business leaders, said any number of people in the Labour Party could lead the racially divided nation in a new democratic government.

Among the Labour Party's candidates is Mr Poseci Bune, an indigenous Fijian and former head of the public service who is highly regarded by voters and other political leaders.

There has been speculation that Mr Chaudhry is prepared to offer Bune the prime ministership if Mr Iloilo does



Voters queue up on the last day of polling in Suva on Saturday. — AP/PTI

not ask Mr Chaudhry to take on that role. Under the Fiji constitution, the President has the power to appoint the Prime Minister.

"The Fiji Labour Party will nominate its own Prime Minister but not on the basis of race," Mr Chaudhry said to-

day. "The Labour Party is firm that whoever is party leader will be the Prime Minister because we follow the convention." His comments came as polling ended across the nation after seven days of voting. Counting begins Monday, with the results expected

midweek.

Post-election precautions: Fiji's security forces said today they are well prepared to combat a possible repeat of last year's nationalist coup if Mr Mahendra Chaudhry is re-elected next week, Reuters adds.

THE STAR

Chaudhry faces hostile campaign

AFP & REUTERS

SUVA, Aug. 31. — Fiji's coup-deposed Prime Minister Mr Mahendra Chaudhry was poised today to win a mandate to return to office — but was also facing an intense, almost obsessive last-minute campaign to keep him out.

Senior diplomatic sources here were predicting confusion in the week ahead, with no clear picture of the eventual outcome.

They say the outcome may eventually depend less on what the country's 4,51,000 voters have decided, and more on how an ageing traditional ratu or chief, President Mr Josefa Iloilo, wants to handle it.

The Constitution gives him remarkable discretion, only telling him to appoint a Prime Minister who "in his opinion has the support of the House", with no method given for determining who has this support.

The Fiji Sun newspaper today headlined a report: Ambush, saying Fijian indigenous parties were working on a document of unity aimed solely at keeping Mr Chaudhry, the island's first ethnic Indian premier who was deposed in a racially-motivated coup last year, out of office.

A week of polling ends tomorrow evening and counting will begin on Monday to produce a 71-seat Parliament, thus restoring the democracy lost on 19 May last year when George Speight and a gang of special forces soldiers seized Mr Chaudhry and his government hostage for 56 days.

Election week has been incident free, and the capital is the calmest it has been for over a year. Heavy turnouts have been reported in Fiji's central and western sugar growing districts, a stronghold for the Labour Party headed by Mr Chaudhry.

Polling officials have been told to monitor for voter fraud and manipulation in the otherwise peaceful election.

Major parties have complained that some candidates were trying to buy votes and in some instances voters were being given ballots already checked.

THE STATESMAN

Fijians start to vote, army to lie low

REUTERS

NADI (Fiji), Aug. 25. - Fiji's first democratic election since a coup last year to remove ethnic Indians from government began today amid promises by the military it would keep a low profile over a week of polling.

The army installed an interim government last year after nationalist rebels stormed Fiji's parliament, taking the Prime Minister, Mr Mahendra Chaudhry, and members of his coalition government hostage in a siege lasting 56 days.

"We have turned security for the election over to the police," the army spokesman, Captain Ned Taito, said.

"The police will be the primary security providers and will only be backed by the military if the police need it," the election supervisor, Mr Walter Rigamoto, said.

Mr Laisenia Qarase, named by the army last year as caretaker Prime Minister, and Mr Chaudhry are

viewed as front-runners, along with Mr Tapeni Baba, a school teacher seen as a moderate.

Coup leader Mr George Speight is also running for Prime Minister - as a candidate for the indigenous Fiji's Conservative Alliance - from a prison cell where he awaiting trial for treason.

Polling started slowly on the first day, with low voter turnouts in the major cities of Suva, Lautoka and Nadi.

Eighteen parties and 351 candidates covering Fiji's more than 300 far-flung islands are contesting the day shopping, walking past polling



A roadside polling station at the Fiji nursing school near Suva on Saturday. - AP/PTI

Voting booths, located mostly in schools and community centres, were largely deserted several hours after opening. In Suva, people paraded into stores for traditional Saturday shopping, walking past polling

Fijians have lived for decades may be

stations with hardly a glance.

Nearly every patch of open grass in Fiji was occupied by games of rugby, an obsession in Fiji.

"I don't have an interest in the election," Mr Maciu Bola, an indigenous Fiji said.

"I for one am not sure why turnout is low, but by past indications we hope to see a difference by mid-

day today," Mr Rigamoto said.

Some have speculated that scepticism that a new government will be able to reverse much of the segregationist environment in which many

keeping people away from the polls.

The election is being observed by 20 UN staff and a team of 20 other observers - eight from Japan, three from New Zealand, two from Australia and the rest from African and South American countries.

Conflict between ethnic Indians and native Fijians has fuelled three coups and a military mutiny since 1987. Ethnic Indians, ancestors of indentured labour brought to work the country's sugar cane fields, make up about 44 per cent of Fiji's 800,000 population and dominate business.

Fiji's electoral system splinters the country along racial lines, with parliament's 71 seats divided in 46 communal Fiji and ethnic Indian seats and 25 mixed race or "open" seats.

A plethora of indigenous parties are expected to divide the Fiji vote and Mr Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party, which is dominated by ethnic Indians, is again forecast to dominate.

Race against power politics

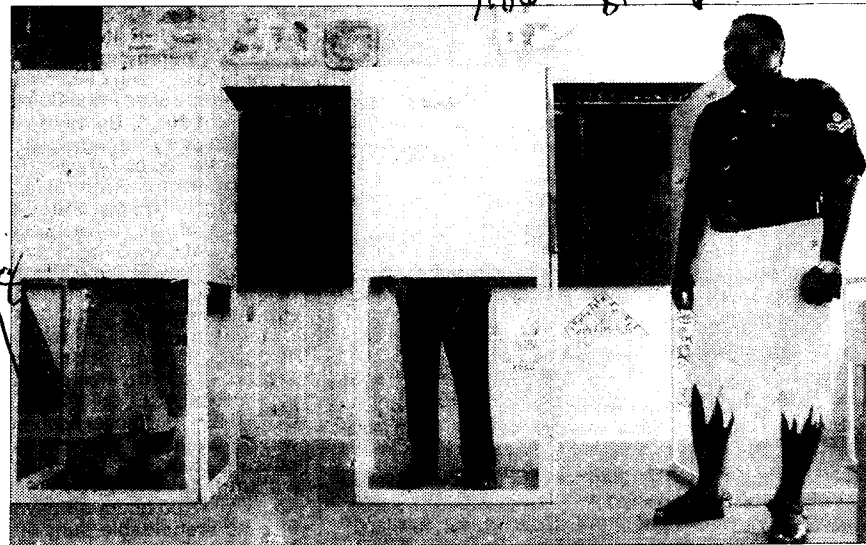
Vested political interests rather than race are at the core of Fiji's first election since last year's coup, argues writer **SHUBHA SINGH**

FIJI took a crucial step towards restoration of democracy when it began electing a government on August 25 to replace the caretaker regime that took charge after the legitimate government was overthrown in May 2000. Fiji went to the polls through a Supreme Court order that ruled the interim government as unconstitutional and upheld the validity of the Constitution adopted in 1997.

Last year, television screens were crammed with images of the coup in Fiji. Failed businessman George Speight led an armed group that captured Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his cabinet in Parliament Buildings on May 19, 2000. Throughout the 65-day long hostage crisis, Speight, clad in a crisp shirt and tie, could be seen expounding on his version of rights of the indigenous people in Fiji and his opposition to a Prime Minister of Indian descent.

Speight's gang did not have the support of the army or any organised section. But as the siege continued, he managed to attract the poorer, unemployed ethnic Fijians to flock to the lawns of Parliament Buildings for a gala Fijian style *lovo* (feast). The army finally negotiated an end to the crisis and installed an interim administration packed with hardline, nationalist indigenous Fijians.

Race or ethnicity has always been a pivotal aspect of the cultural, political and economic life in Fiji's complex society in the past two centuries of its history.



Eighteen parties and 351 candidates are contesting the election in Fiji. Reuters

About 44 per cent of Fiji's population of about 800,000 are of Indian origin, most of them third or fourth generation descendants of Indian indentured workers who were taken to Fiji to work on the sugar cane plantations. Present day Indians in Fiji are doctors, lawyers, teachers, businessmen, farmers and politicians. Indigenous Fijians form about 52 per cent of the population.

In India there is a tendency to view Fiji's politics in a simplistic but chauvinistic manner of an "Indian" Prime Minister being deposed and "Indians" being targeted. Ironically, it is also the manner in which the conflict in Fiji is portrayed in the international media; as a fight between an indigenous tribal people and a migrant community that has taken over the country. However, last year's turmoil in Fiji was basically a struggle for political power by vested interests that had lost out with the defeat of the Rabuka Government in 1999.

What the Speight gang had attempted was a repeat of an army coup in

1987. Since independence in 1970, Fiji had been hailed as a symbol of multi-racial harmony and progressive development. A change in government in 1987 indicated the end of traditional leadership of the indigenous Fijian tribal chiefs. Dr Timoci Bavadra, an ethnic Fijian though not of the chiefly class, remained Prime Minister for less than a month, when Lt Col Sitiveni Rabuka overthrew the Indian dominated government in a military coup. Rabuka's slogan was Fiji for the Fijians.

Rabuka later stood for election, but a leadership battle within the ruling party meant that he had to seek the support of Indian leaders to form the government. It was a decade of economic decline, growing poverty and unemployment that forced Rabuka to reverse many of his pro-Fijian policies and agree to a new more equitable constitution in 1987.

Rabuka however lost the 1999 elections to Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party that had contested on "bread and butter issues". Thirty years of Fijian rule had

not addressed many of the ills of the indigenous society, though the affirmative action policies had produced a new indigenous Fijian elite. Speight's actions brought out some deep tribal divisions within the Fijian community, shattering the myth of cultural unity among the Fijians.

Along with Chaudhry, Speight demanded the ouster of President Ratu

ages land leases, but Fijians have been discontented by the returns.

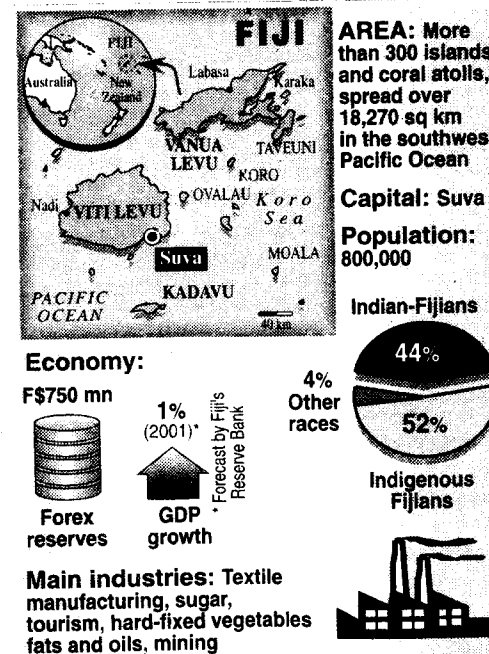
Though initially targeted at the Indian farm leases, the post-coup actions have shown that the feelings are much more widespread. Indigenous Fijians as a united group can dominate Fiji's politics, for the highly individualistic Indian leadership divides the Indians into two groups. The 71-member House of Representatives has 23 seats reserved for ethnic Fijians and 19 for Indians, 25 open seats and the rest for other ethnic groups. There are 23 political parties contesting the elections, many of them small splinter groups of indigenous Fijians.

Chaudhry remains a dominant figure, though he has lost much support in a leadership challenge. His deputy, Dr Tupeni Baba, quit the party, with Indian and Fijian supporters to form the New Labour Unity Party. Chaudhry is likely to draw the majority of the Indian vote since the traditional Indian party, the National Federation Party has run out of effective leaders after the debacle of the 1999 elections.

Interim PM Laisenia Qarase has emerged as the leader of the hardline Fijians. His blueprint (incorporating most of the demands of coup leaders) looks attractive to many Fijians. He has announced plans to constitute a constitution review commission to ensure political supremacy remains with the indigenous Fijians. Speight is one of the candidates sponsored by the Conservative Alliance.

Qarase's nomination was accepted on the grounds that he has not been convicted as yet, though his trial for treason begins on August 29. The elections are likely to result in a coalition government. What Fiji needs is a strong and decisive government that could stabilise the shattered economy and restore confidence among the country's population.

(Shubha Singh has authored the recently released Fiji: A Precarious Coalition)



IE Graphics/B.K. SHARMA

Kamisese Mara, the country's first PM and a high ranking Fijian tribal chief. It was a direct assault on the Fijian feudal hierarchy and exacerbated the underlying differences. The intra-Fijian discord among the Fijian tribes came out in the open, as Fijians overran airports, army camps, the main power station and police stations demanding the return of their land. In the Fijian tribal system land is collectively owned by the entire clan. An autonomous Fijian body man-

'I am still mentally fit to rule'

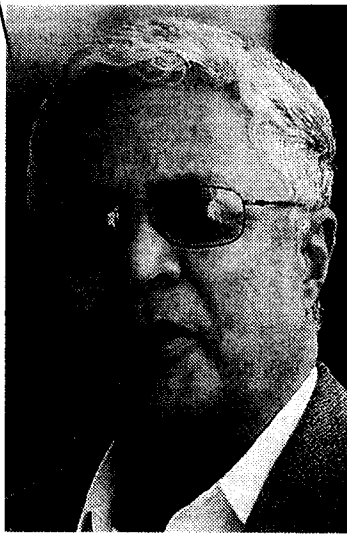
By Amit Baruah ^{FD-12}

SINGAPORE, JULY 31. The deposed Fijian Prime Minister, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhry, has described as "rubbish" a report that former political hostages may not be mentally fit to lead the country again.

"The report is rubbish, without substance. I am of tougher stuff and do not need a psychologist," Mr. Chaudhry was quoted as telling *The Fiji Times* today.

According to the report, prepared by Father Makario Waqanivalu, U.S.-based psychologist and Catholic priest, political leaders imprisoned during the coup in May 2000 may have lost their ability to function.

On May 19, 2000, Mr. George Speight and his men seized Fiji's Parliament and took Mr. Chaudhry — legally-elected Prime Minister — hostage. Eighteen persons, including Mr. Chaudhry,



were held until July 13.

"It was possible that their ability to function, as leaders of the nation, would be affected by more than 50 days of confinement," Fa-

ther Waqanivalu said in his report.

A tough-talking Mr. Chaudhry, however, said that the team which prepared the report suffered from trauma and its members should be treated. "I have a lot of faith in truth and justice. I will not be moved by any circumstance or report," he said.

Father Waqanivalu, who headed the Fiji Trauma Recovery Team (FTRT), said it was against charity and justice to assume that the hostages were not affected by their detention.

"It would, therefore, be an injustice to them, their families and the Fiji nation as a whole to put them in a position of leadership without first giving them appropriate psychological assessment and consequent treatment when needed," the report said.

"Only time will show the effects of more than 50 days of confinement, ill-treatment and traumatic

stress related to their loss of position (of Cabinet members) and related benefits," it claimed.

The team, however, could not say how individual hostages had been affected. The report also stated that indigenous Fijians living in the capital Suva were more affected than Fijian Indians "because of confusion, conflict and division within family circles about which side they were on, who was right or wrong and seeing their loved ones divide".

"The older children of those who joined Speight and were living at the Parliament complex felt ashamed, disturbed and confused. They lost trust and confidence in the adult Fijians for guidance and advice. Younger children believed outright that their parents were absolutely right. They idealised and imitated them especially at the roadblocks," the report added.

4014
Left gains
in Cyprus

NICOSIA (CYPRUS), MAY 28. The Cyprus communist party AKEL emerged on Monday as the top vote-getter in parliamentary elections, boosting its chances in 2003 presidential elections in the Greek Cypriot portion of Cyprus.

With 99.56 per cent of the votes officially counted, AKEL was leading with 34.7 per cent of the vote to 34 per cent for the Democratic Rally, the President, Mr. Glafcos Clerides' party. The completion of the official count later on Monday was not expected to change the outcome significantly.

AKEL won 1.65 per cent more votes than it did in the previous 1996 election while the rally lost 0.55 per cent of the votes.

This was the communists' first lead in parliamentary elections since the island became independent from British colonial rule in 1960.

In previous elections, AKEL, the Greek acronym for the Reformist Party of the Working People, had been averaging a third of the vote.

AKEL's slight edge was expected to give it one or two seats more than the 19 it had in the previous Parliament, while the Rally would lose one of its 20 seats. The chamber has 56 seats.

The centrist Democratic Union party polled 14.84 percentage points, winning nine seats, followed by the socialist KISOS-EDOK with 6.51 per cent and four seats. Despite ideological differences, both major parties support the entry of Cyprus into the European Union. The new Parliament will have the task of approving the legislation to make the membership possible by 2003. - AP

THE

1

Probe into Fiji coup starts today

XD-19

SUVA, JULY 8. When a preliminary inquiry into the treason charges against the coup-leader Mr. George Speight, and his accomplices starts here tomorrow, many in Fiji will be asking if they have the right man.

The senior army officer, Mr. Viliame Seruvakula, disclosed before taking up a job with the New Zealand Army earlier this year that Mr. Speight was not the brain behind the operation, but only the front man.

The real mastermind behind the coup, which saw the country's first ethnic Indian Prime Minister and his Cabinet being held captive for 56 days, was a core group of seven politicians, ethnic Indian businessmen and senior army officers, Mr. Seruvakula alleged. He said it irked him to see these people "still walking free" while Mr. Speight and 12 others were detained at Nukulau island awaiting the start of their treason trial.

Fiji's *Sunday Post* editor, Mr. Mesake Koroi, claimed that the seven conspirators met at a house in the Suva suburb of Laucala Beach Estate.

"The identity of the real plotters lie in the unveiling of those

that met at a house at Laucala Beach Estate well before the coup," he wrote.

The deposed Prime Minister, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhry, insists that several prominent ethnic Indian businessmen financed the coup and should be brought to justice.

Both Mr. Chaudhry and Mr. Koroi allege that businessmen provided a constant supply of food to the rebels in Parliament.

"All it needed was a letter from a Member in Parliament" and truck loads of goods would arrive at the complex where Mr. Speight and his men were holed up with their hostages, Mr. Koroi said.

Mr. Seruvakula had claimed in a recent interview that those who plotted the May 19 coup last year had owed "millions of dollars" to banks and in unpaid taxes. "I think the Inland Revenue Department is owed some \$96 million in taxes and the Asset Management Bank (AMB) is owed \$210 million.

"That is a lot of money owed by a handful of people," he said.

The army officer also revealed that he was offered tens of thousands of dollars to support the coup. — AFP

Fiji and its polity

By Biman C. Prasad

40-12
11/4

THE DECISION by Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs to appoint the Interim Administration led by Mr. Laisenia Qarase goes beyond the provisions of the 1997 Constitution. This is now rightly being challenged in the High Court of Fiji. However, the consolation from the outcome of the Appeals Court and the decision by Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs is that the 1997 Constitution has been accepted as the supreme law of the land.

Let us first look at the reasons given by the President in appointing the Qarase regime as the caretaker Government. After the Appeals Court decision, the Peoples Coalition was deeply divided on the possible step to return the country to parliamentary democracy under the 1997 Constitution. The Peoples Coalition was a fragile grouping in the first place, quickly cobbled together before the election. The leader of the Party of National Unity, Mr. Apisai Tora, was defeated by Mr. Mahendra Chaudhry's Labour party candidate. Mr. Tora became the biggest critic of Mr. Chaudhry and led the first protest march against his Government. Mr. Tora is now a caretaker Minister. After the election, the People's Coalition Government was never united with factions in different coalition partners. The most notable one was within the Fijian Association. One of the Fijian Association members, Ratu Timoci Silatolu, in the People's Coalition Government was a key person in the illegal overthrow of the Chaudhry regime and is now part of the rebel group detained on the island of Nukulau waiting treason trial. So the People's Coalition was a marriage of convenience never to last long.

The leadership struggle in the Labour Party surfaced before the Appeals Court decision and continued after it. While the Labour Party Caucus supported the formation of a Government of national unity, Mr. Chaudhry actively campaigned against it. After the Appeals Court judgment, Mr. Chaudhry refused to call a Party Caucus meeting to sort out the leadership battle and instead went ahead and advised the President to dissolve Parliament and call for fresh elections. This is what the President did except that

he did not appoint Mr. Chaudhry caretaker Prime Minister but re-appointed Mr. Qarase. Mr. Chaudhry and his Labour Party lost a golden opportunity to form a Government of national unity under the 1997 Constitution.

A Government of national unity would have served the country well in providing political stability which is vital for the survival of the economy that has been completely shattered since the May 19 coup. Thousands of people have lost their jobs and have now slipped into abject poverty. Various kinds of associated social ills are gripping the country now. The tourism industry is in a terrible

The reinstatement of the 1997 Constitution presents a new opportunity to the people of Fiji to unite and form a strong multi-party Government and move forward.

shape as arrivals have declined considerably over the last 10 months. A Government of national unity could have managed some of these issues without difficulty.

Given the bickering in the Labour Party and Mr. Chaudhry's refusal to participate in a Government of national unity, it may be appropriate at this time to go for a fresh mandate under the 1997 Constitution. There are a number of issues that would be vital in the coming general election. The indigenous Fijian political parties are deeply divided on a number of issues. These include the solution to the land problems and their position on the 1997 Constitution. However, these parties also realise that under the preferential voting system within the 1997 Constitution, they have to deal with political outfits of divergent views. One of the requirements in the 1997 Constitution is that a multi-party Government will have to be formed after the election. All political parties which gain more than ten per cent of the seats in Parliament would have the chance to be in Government. It is mandatory for the Prime Minister to invite them to join the Government. This provision was not heeded by Mr. Chaudhry after the general elections in 1999; he

failed to include the indigenous Fijian SVT party which had more than ten per cent of the seats in Parliament. This is despite the fact that the SVT leadership was instrumental in putting the 1997 Constitution in place. Instead, Mr. Chaudhry invited the VLV, a small indigenous Fijian outfit, to join the Government and two of its three members were given senior Cabinet positions. More ironical is that this political party, which was included in his Government by Mr. Chaudhry, was the key proponent of anti-Constitution propaganda amongst the Fijian people. The VLV also campaigned on the platform that Fiji be declared a

Christian state. Mr. Chaudhry entertained this extremist party into his Government and went against the spirit of the 1997 Constitution by excluding the SVT. Mr. Chaudhry started tinkering with the 1997 Constitution within months of coming to power.

For the Fiji Indians, the election presents an opportunity to re-evaluate the thinking on the 1997 Constitution and on what sort of leadership is needed to ensure that it is made to work. Furthermore, it allows them to re-evaluate the prospects of having a solution to the land problems. The indigenous Fijians are deeply divided along different provincial lines and the dilemma for them is how to unite and contest the general election in August. The prospect of a united indigenous Fijian political party does not appear to be a possibility at this stage and is unlikely in the future also. Under the 1997 Constitution political parties would have to cooperate to benefit from the alternative preferential voting system. This fact alone could create alliances among ethnically divided political parties.

While there is some semblance of political stability in Fiji, the economy is getting further into recession. This is likely to continue well after the August general

elections. For any economy 10-12 months of uncertainty is just too much to bear. Unfortunately, for Fiji this is the reality.

Today, Fiji is a shattered and discredited nation trying to position itself in the globalisation process. We condemn democracy, we condemn human rights, we condemn the rule of law, we throw out constitutions, and we want terrorists to be released. Yet some of these things we are so keen to condemn are fundamental to creating our own identity as a nation and to be able to participate in the globalisation process. To be able to reap the benefits and to mitigate the negatives we need to adhere to the basics of the universal principles of human rights, democracy and good governance. Those who argue against these principles must realise that a whole world is moving towards achieving economic growth based on sound democratic and universal principles of human rights. In fact, we should be fast moving towards non-racial democracy if as a nation we want to create an identity that would be widely acclaimed at home and abroad.

The reinstatement of the 1997 Constitution presents a new opportunity for the people of Fiji to unite and form a strong multi-party Government and move forward. From the economic point of view, this should bring back some confidence in the country and it is possible for Fiji to make some recovery of its tourism industry. Tourism is the largest foreign exchange earner for Fiji and provides employment to thousands of people. However, we cannot expect a big turn around in the overall performance of the economy until the end of 2001. Economic growth in an era of globalisation is linked to the prevalence of stable and democratic government, an independent and efficient judiciary and the maintenance of law and order. The confidence of investors both domestic and foreign has been shattered and it will take time to bring it back. In the meantime Fiji will have to wait for the election outcome.

(The writer is Senior Lecturer in Economic University of the South Pacific, Fiji Co.)

Ethnic Indian Guyanese President

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

GEORGETOWN, April 1. — An ethnic Indian, Mr Bharrat Jagdeo, has been sworn in Guyanese President, after the country's Chief Justice refused a request by the Opposition People's National Congress to stay the proceedings.

He was sworn in yesterday.

Last week, Mr Jagdeo, of the Leftist People's Progressive Party, was declared winner of the 19 March election with 53.1 per cent votes, against 41.7 per cent for former President Mr Desmond Hoyte.

But Mr Hoyte and his People's National Congress Party challenged the election results — delayed due to slow vote deliveries from the provinces and careful scrutiny of ballots by the electoral commission — on grounds that the official numbers did not match the party's own vote tabulation.

THE STATESMAN

- 2 APR 2001

Washington appeals for calm in trouble-torn Haiti

Washington, March 21, 1991

THE UNITED States has issued an appeal for calm in Haiti amid increasing violence between opposition activists demanding new elections and supporters of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

In a statement late on Tuesday, the State Department urged Haiti's political leaders and their supporters to refrain from making inflammatory remarks and provoking more violence. "We call on the Government of Haiti and its security forces to respect and protect the democratic and constitutional right of all citizens to assemble peacefully and express their political opinions," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said in the written statement.

A similar appeal from the Organisation of American States condemned the current

wave of violence in Haiti. In a separate statement, the OAS echoed the State Department's plea for all parties to refrain from actions and statements that could exacerbate tension and jeopardise efforts to find a peaceful solution to the crisis.

The renewed violence began March 14 when Opposition protesters clashed with supporters of Aristide's Government in front of the OAS office in Petionville, a suburb on the edge of the Haitian capital. Haitian riot police armed with machine guns used tear gas to break up the scuffles as the fighting spilled into a nearby public plaza. Opposition activists were seeking OAS support for new legislative and presidential elections.

The protest came as Foreign Affairs Minister Antonio Joseph met OAS officials in Washington to discuss a proposed commis-

sion to monitor human rights in Haiti and possibly observe an election runoff for the parliamentary vote.

The State Department said on Tuesday the protests had turned increasingly violent in recent days with incidents of tire burning, rock-throwing, road-blocks, and shootings that have resulted in several reported casualties.

Haiti's political Opposition has sharply criticised the administration of Aristide, the Caribbean nation's first freely elected president, after it refused to reconsider results from a parliamentary election last May. Aristide, a former priest, rose to power a decade ago in a grass-roots movement but was ousted seven months into his term by a military coup. A US-led military invasion restored him to power three years later.

Reuters

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

22 MAR 2001

A DIM ROAD-MAP FOR DEMOCRACY

FIJI'S CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS is sought to be resolved by its leaders belonging to the majority indigenous people in a strange but arguably 'sensible' manner. In a moralist sense, this can only help sustain the international community's doubts about the willingness of the native Fijians, or at least their leaders, to share power with the tiny South Pacific state's ethnic Indians, who constitute nearly 44 per cent of the population as an overwhelming minority. Fiji's leaders are packaging their narrow majoritarian approach as the only practical solution that could prevent a recrudescence of violence against the ethnic Indians. In essence, the international community is being asked to empathise with not only the ethnic Indians but also the native South Pacific stock, however wholesome might be the Fijian identity claimed by the country's huge minority. Viewed in this perspective, it is not surprising that the latest manoeuvres made by the native Fijian chiefs and their loyalists among the political leaders have not produced any new international backlash, at this moment at least. At stake are the constitutional legitimacy and political credibility of the promise being made by the latest 'interim' administration to hold a general election next August with a view to restoring democracy that was dismantled by Mr. George Speight, an amateur leader of a 'coup' and by the Fijian military establishment in that order last year.

The immediate gameplan of Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs, which occupies a pivotal constitutional space, in conjunction with the President as also the twice-born 'interim' Prime Minister is not far to seek. Their main calculation is that the international community can be persuaded to give them a chance to resolve their crisis on their own. From their standpoint, Fiji has remained largely on the back-burners of the foreign policy establishments of major powers despite some sanctions that Australia and New Zealand, in particular, imposed on Suva

last year in the context of Mr. Speight's 'coup' and the military's 'counter-coup'. It is also a truism that external sanctions might only hurt the interests of the ethnic Indians, who have over time commanded a strategic presence in Fiji's economy. But the core element of the current constitutional crisis is the continued denial of Indian political rights since the day when Mr. Speight 'ousted' Mr. Mahendra Chaudhry, Fiji's first elected Prime Minister with an Indian ancestry.

The latest judgment by the Court of Appeal has been ostensibly accepted by Fiji's native chiefs. This outward reality pertains to the court-ordained sanctity of the multi-racial Constitution of 1997, which facilitated Mr. Chaudhry's emergence as Prime Minister in 1999. This implies that Fiji's traditional power-brokers will not dispute the court's finding that the 1997 Constitution is "a reliable expression of the hopes and aspirations of the whole population" inclusive of the natives. By resorting nevertheless to a stratagem of replacing for just a day the military-backed 'interim' civilian government, whose legality the court has ruled against, and by requisitioning the services of a hand-picked Prime Minister for 'barely 19 hours in order to have the coup-crippled parliament revived only to be dissolved, the Fijian leaders have sought to observe the final word in law. The only justification for such astonishing tactics is the principle of 'necessity'. The argument is that the restoration of Mr. Chaudhry will be a divisive step. If he is therefore unable to mobilise the Fijian masses across the racial divide over this 'injustice', the promised August poll will be the only near-term test of his country's honour. The efforts of the powers-that-be to rewrite the 1997 document have been declared null and void by a court, even as Mr. Chaudhry steps up campaign against a perceived constitutional charade.

111-1100

Clearing Fijian skies

SOME SANITY is expected to be restored to Fiji's political life following the verdict of the Court of Appeals that the interim government put in place after the coup is illegal. But it is far from clear whether Mahendra Chaudhry, the democratically elected Prime Minister whose multi-ethnic People's Coalition government was overthrown, can expect to get back his job.

In November last year, Justice Antony Gates of the Fiji High Court had upheld the validity of the country's multi-racial Constitution of 1997 under which Mr Chaudhry had been elected. Observing that the putschists had unlawfully abrogated the Constitution, the judge had ordered the convening of Parliament to elect a new government. The interim government backed by chauvinist ethnic Fijians had appealed against this verdict, and has now lost its case in the country's highest court. It has also

tendered its resignation to the Acting President in deference to the court's ruling.

But it appears that the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), comprising Fiji's traditional ethnic leaders who appoint the President, will have the last word. The GCC is already being urged by Fijian nationalist elements not to bother with the Appeals Court directive. It will be moving in a dangerously anti-democratic direction if it heeds the revanchists. Several elements in the political system, including some in Mr Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party, have urged the formation of a Government of National Unity under a new leader. Mr Chaudhry has advised the acting President to dissolve Parliament and hold fresh elections. He has done so "after careful and wide consultations" and in his capacity as "the constitutional and lawful Prime Minister". There is a point here, but compromises are hardly alien to politics.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

MAR 2007

Fiji President says no to resignations

DEUTSCHE PRESSE AGENTUR

WELLINGTON, March 8. - Fiji's acting President has refused to accept the mass resignation of the interim government, it was reported from Suva today.

Mr Ratu Josefa Iloilo asked the present administration to remain in power until he can take steps to restore a constitutional government, Radio New Zealand reported.

It may be noted that the ousted Prime Minister, Mr Mahendra Chaudhry, had advised Mr Iloilo yesterday to dissolve Parliament and call a new election.

The President's move continues political uncertainty created last week, when the Court of Appeal had ruled that the interim administration under

Prime Minister, Mr Laisenia Qarase, was illegal.

It was unclear what legal authority the President had to ask the government to stay on. But a correspondent said the President was apparently concerned about creating a power vacuum if he accepted the resignation of the 20-strong Cabinet before deciding whether to reconvene the Parliament in place before last May's nationalist coup or call a new election.

Today a meeting of the great council of chiefs, which is the paramount body of the majority indigenous Fijian population, was held in Suva.

The situation in Suva was confused as people awaited the outcome of the meeting. Parties dominated by indigenous Fijians are looking to the chiefs for

direction to an outcome which will ensure their dominance.

The situation was further clouded today when the council reportedly sacked its chairman, Mr Sitiveni Rabuka, who himself had led two military coups in the Nationalist Fijian Cause in 1987.

He is blamed for the 1997 Constitution that helped the Chaudhry government into power, New Zealand's TV3 reported.

The Fiji Labour Party, headed by Mr Mahendra Chaudhry, is in the middle of a power struggle over leadership of the party.

Mr Chaudhry's former deputy and rival for the leadership, Dr Tupeni Baba, has dubbed Mr Chaudhry's recommendation to Mr Iloilo as "unwise" and has held separate talks with the President.

THE STATESMAN

- 9 MAR 2001

Fiji's interim govt quits

ASSOCIATED PRESS

SUVA, March 7. - Fiji's interim government has resigned, Fiji Radio reported today, citing unnamed government sources.

Meanwhile, ousted Prime Minister, Mr Mahendra Chaudhry called today for elections to end Fiji's constitutional crisis and return the country to democracy, after almost a year of political chaos. Mr Chaudhry said, he advised the President Mr Ratu Josefa Iloilo, during a meeting today, to recall parliament and clear the way for quick elections. The President had no immediate reaction to the call.

"In moving forward to resolve our constitutional crisis we cannot forget the nation has been through 10 months of painful and traumatic upheaval," Mr Chaudhry told a press conference. "This is not the time for political posturing and point scoring ... the national interest would best be served if we were to go for fresh elections," he added.

While Mr Chaudhry said he made the recommendation as the legal Prime Minister, his call for elections indicated he had abandoned hopes of being reinstated to finish his term.

Mr Chaudhry's hopes of reinstatement have been frustrated by a lack of support in his own People's Coalition and opposition from other political groups.

Fiji was plunged into new uncertainty after an Appeals Court ruling last week that the country's interim government is illegal. The President is due to meet tomorrow with the powerful Council of Chiefs, a body of traditional leaders, who may reject the Court's ruling.

India's reaction: India and New Zealand today favoured formation of the government of "National Unity" in Fiji, which should take steps to protect interests of people of Indian origin in the South Pacific Nation, UNI adds from New Delhi.

The 'Future of Indians in Fiji should not be swept under the carpet by the new set-up in Fiji where the "National Unity Government" faces less destabilising chances.

This was agreed at a meeting between external affairs minister Mr Jaswant Singh and New Zealand foreign minister Mr Phil-Goff here. Mr Singh said that any solution in Fiji should not lose sight of problems of Indian origin people.

THE STATESMAN

- 8 MAR 2001

Fiji should go back to polls for a new mandate, says Chaudhry

SUVA: Fiji's deposed prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry conceded on Tuesday that fresh general elections might be necessary to bring the country back to constitutional rule.

Mr Chaudhry, whose leadership of the Fiji Labour Party is under threat, also acknowledged that at least four people wanted the prime ministership and the issue could be settled only when Parliament is recalled.

Elected as Fiji's first Indian prime minister in May, 1999, and deposed by a coup a year later, Mr Chaudhry said he believed an election as early as possible might be the only solution to the constitutional crisis. "I myself am considering that option quite seriously," he said. "It's best to go back to the people for a fresh mandate."

But he denied persistent charges that he made mistakes or rubbed people up the wrong way and said the coalition had not been "arrogant or intractable". His comments followed a call for him to stand aside by his former deputy and for-

eign minister Tupeni Baba, who claimed to have the backing to challenge the leadership of the Labour Party.

In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Mr Baba, an indigenous Fijian, said, "Chaudhry has been found by people to be totally unsuitable for governing the country. They have called for his stepping down, not only from our party, but from everywhere." Mr Chaudhry was under growing pressure not to seek reinstatement as the interim government considered its response to a court ruling that it was illegal.

The cabinet met on Tuesday and later briefed President Ratu Josefa Iloilo on possible options in the wake of the court ruling. Mr Iloilo and Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase have said they would abide by a court ruling restoring the multi-racial 1997 constitution, abandoned after last year's coup.

The Fiji appeal court last week ruled that Qarase's interim government imposed by the military fol-

lowing the coup, was illegal, and said that Iloilo must recall Parliament and vacate his office by March 15.

Troops stood guard outside the government building in Suva during the cabinet meeting in a show of force by the military. With no timetable for restoring democracy, Mr Chaudhry's five-party People's Coalition was in disarray. Three of the parties said on Monday they supported a government of national unity, despite Mr Chaudhry's opposition. Chaudhry's Fiji Labor Party was one of the three parties backing a unity government.

There is a growing belief in the coalition that an indigenous Fijian at the head of the government is needed to unite the ethnically divided nation.

Ethnic Indians make up 44 per cent of the population. Indigenous Fijians account for 51 per cent. Relations crumbled as Indians gained more economic and political power, culminating with Mr Chaudhry's 1999 election. (Agencies)

Fiji court rules interim Govt illegal

Suva (Fiji), March 1

FJI'S COURT of appeal on Thursday declared the country's interim Government illegal and ordered the re-assembly of the last democratically elected parliament.

The court of appeal said President Ratu Josefa Iloilo must resummon lawmakers and step down by March 15. But it was not clear who would then take control of the government.

A military-backed interim government took power last year after a May-coup by hardline nationalists, who ousted the country's first ethnic Indian prime minister.

The ruling appeared to restore authority to the parliament, leav-

ing it up to lawmakers to form a new government.

But lawmakers are divided over what to do and the court's ruling is likely to lead to widespread confusion.

Iloilo was instructed to relinquish power and turn over his authority to the parliament, which has not sat since the coup.

It was not clear how the military would react to the ruling, although senior figures said earlier that they would respect the outcome of the hearing.

There was tight security around the court and across the capital in case the decision triggered political violence.

Failed businessman George Speight led a gang of gunmen inside the parliament on May 19,

taking the government hostage and holding some members for 56 days in a standoff with the military.

The hostages were eventually freed and Speight and his henchmen arrested. Most of the plotters are in custody awaiting trial on treason charges.

A high court judge ruled late last year that the interim government installed by the military after the coup was illegal and should step down in favour of a new administration formed by the old parliament.

The government appealed the ruling to the country's court of appeal.

Five foreign judges heard the case last week, in which the government argued it should be

allowed to stay in power to lead the country back to democracy in March 2002 elections.

While the appeals court on Thursday ruled against the government and returned sovereignty to parliament, forming a new government will be difficult. Fiji remains bitterly divided with hardline nationalists determined to exclude the country's large ethnic Indian minority from any significant political power.

Ousted prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry has vowed not to share power with any politicians linked to the coup. Fijian nationalists and elements within the military are unlikely to accept Chaudhry's return to power. AP

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

5 MAR 2002

Deposed Fiji PM faces challenge from allies

SUVA: Fiji's deposed prime minister is facing challenge from within his political coalition to replace him and clear the way for a government of national unity. Some groups in the five-party People's Coalition of ousted premier Mahendra Chaudhry want to replace the ethnic Indian Fijian with Tupeni Baba, an indigenous Fijian. Some coalition leaders believe they can only regain power with an indigenous Fijian in the ethnically-divided nation.

The move against Mr Chaudhry came as Fiji's political factions scrambled in the wake of a ruling by the court of appeals last week that an interim government imposed after a coup last May was illegal. The government was ordered to recall Parliament by March 15 to select a new administration.

The interim government has said it will comply with the court order, but nationalist groups may oppose the ruling. The nation's powerful tribal chiefs may also intervene against the ruling. Mr Baba, former deputy prime minister and foreign minister, said on Sunday that members of the coalition have asked him to challenge Mr Chaudhry as leader.

"Yes, I have been asked, Yes, but I don't want it to be said that I was merely asked because I am Fijian," Mr Baba said. "If I served in that position I would like to serve as a person who has the merit and the acceptability of the Fijian people." But Mr Chaudhry repeated his claim on Sunday that he is still Fiji's legal prime minister, and said he believes he retains the support of his coalition. (AP)

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AN OPPORTUNITY IN FIJI

3

NOT UNOFTEN HAS judicial intervention restored parliamentary democracy but the latest instance in Fiji, the Pacific island grouping, is all the more heartening and welcome because it can result in the redress of a terrible wrong done to large sections whose only fault was that they traced their ethnic origin to India. By upholding the validity of the 1997 Constitution which reintroduced multiethnic democracy after a lapse of more than a decade, Fiji's Court of Appeal has hopefully written the final chapter on the violent rebellion sparked by George Speight and the dark forces behind him last summer. The verdict, not entirely unexpected, is a blow for democracy in the multiracial island nation. But conclusive victory for the democratic forces will come only when all parties respect the judgment and return the country to the path of constitutionality by restoring the ousted regime of Mr. Mahendra Chaudhry. Like the Commonwealth which suspended Fiji after the Speight coup, India will watch the next moves of the military-sponsored interim government which has been ruled illegitimate by the court. Major pointers to the direction in which Fijian society is set to move will be provided by the developments later this week when the Great Council of Chiefs, the powerful voice of the indigenous people, convenes to debate the verdict.

The Council of Chiefs has more often than not played a dubious role, launching actions prejudicial to the interests of people of Indian origin. But if it has learnt its lesson from the experience of the past two decades, it will act swiftly to restore the 1997 Constitution, which is the best guarantee for the rights of all Fijians regardless of the accident of their ethnicity. That Constitution, itself resulting from the ordeals of a decade of blatant ethnic denial, must be fully respected if the nation is not to suffer the trauma of ethnic hatred and violence again. Ever since it gained independence, ethnic divisions have

dominated politics in the nation. But the first bitter taste of discord came when the military intervened in 1987 in the name of ensuring that any future set-up guaranteed political power to Fiji's native Melanesian population. It was an unconcealed attack on the people of Indian origin who had over the years acquired a dominant role in some areas of activity such as commerce and trade. The coup leader then, Col. Sitiveni Rabuka, who remains a force even today, launched a systematic campaign against the people of Indian origin which culminated in the promulgation of a ridiculous Constitution in 1990 that gave the indigenous Fijians more than half of all seats in Parliament and barred the people of Indian origin from the post of Prime Minister. It took seven years of struggle to end this when the 1997 Constitution abolished the racially-biased provisions. In democratic elections under this statute two years later, Mr. Chaudhry was elected Prime Minister. The coup last year was aimed against this Constitution. While Speight and his group have been effectively neutralised, there are few indications that justice is being rendered to the people of Indian origin. The court verdict raises the hope that the dark days may end soon.

Last summer's turmoil in Fiji — which was followed by riots targeted at Indians — and on neighbouring Solomon Islands clearly signalled that roots of loyalty to chief and clan run deeper than those to the rather alien traditions of democracy and constitutional equality. The ethnic demon has in fact been visiting many of these Pacific islands, poisoning human relations in East Timor, Aceh, Irian Jaya. In pockets like Fiji, attempts to construct a multiethnic society in the post-colonial era have been repeatedly thwarted by interested groups. These must be defeated if the backward islands are ever to leapfrog into the 21st century.

THE HINDU

3 200 2001

NOT COWED DOWN

Fiji court rules against army

THE Fiji Court of Appeals has upheld the ruling given last November by High Court judge, Tony Gates, that the "1997 Constitution remains the supreme law of the Republic of the Fiji islands and has not been abrogated". This means that parliament is automatically revived and Kamisese Mara and Mahendra Chaudhry restored to their former positions of president and prime minister. However, as we well know, there is the military, which is effectively in command but also divided within itself between Melanesian nationalists and those who favour the status quo, plus the fissiparous elements belonging to the counter-revolutionary warfare unit who rallied behind George Speight in May 2000. All these factors have to be negotiated before Fiji can return to constitutional rule. The current prime minister Laisenia Qarase wants to talk to the Great Council of Chiefs, the most powerful political body outside the Army. The last time we saw the chiefs they were bitterly opposed to the idea of an Indian ruling the country. There is little to indicate that they have changed their mind.

Obviously, the other option is to convene the legal Parliament and ask the Fiji Labour Party and the People's Coalition it headed before it was deposed to elect a new leader, a native Fijian, more acceptable to the majority than Chaudhry. This would be a step backward since Chaudhry did manage to break the ethnic polarisation and found considerable support among Fijians. What is intriguing is that the military promises to respect the court's ruling. Conditions might be slightly more propitious now than they were six or seven months ago. Speight is in jail and on trial for treason, his supporters in the Army are in confinement, Mahendra Chaudhry is back in Fiji. There is a modicum of order. In any case, the issue that brought about the coup and the subsequent Army takeover was a political role for the Indians commensurate with their numerical and economic strength. Whether Mahendra Chaudhry becomes prime minister again or not, the issue will remain undecided as long as bodies such as the Great Council of Chiefs and the Army or vigilante groups like the CRWU, continue to intervene whenever they think fit, to restore Melanesian hegemony.

THE STATESMAN

- 3 MAR 2001

Fiji court orders recall of Parliament

REUTERS & AP

SUVA, March 1. - A Fiji court today ruled the country's military-backed interim government illegal and called for recall of Parliament.

The Court of Appeal said the multi-racial 1997 Constitution, which gave ethnic Indians equal political rights as indigenous Fijians, remained the law of the land.

It said the Parliament of Mr Mahendra Chaudhry, the first ethnic Prime Minister who was ousted last year in a coup led by George Speight, had not been dissolved by the military which took the country's control in May 2000.

The court ruled President Ratu Josefa Iloilo must re-summon lawmakers and step down by 15 March. But it was not clear who would then take control of the government. The Parliament has not sat since the coup.

"The 1997 Constitution remains the supreme law of the Republic of the Fiji islands and has not been abrogated," the court said.

The ruling appeared to restore authority to Parliament,



Mr Mahendra Chaudhry in New Delhi on Thursday. AP/PTI

leaving it up to lawmakers to form a new government. But lawmakers are divided over what to do and the court's ruling may lead to confusion.

The interim Prime Minister, Mr Laisenia Qarase, said his government would study the ruling, but indicated Fiji may return to constitutional rule.

In the draft of a speech to the nation given to Reuters, Mr Qarase said his Cabinet would meet next Tuesday and the Great Council of Chiefs,

Fiji's traditional ruling body comprising tribal chieftains, would meet later in the week to discuss the ruling.

"At the end of his consultations, His Excellency (President Iloilo) will announce to the nation the pathway forward to returning our country to constitutional rule," he said.

Diplomats said they feared the ruling could reignite the violence that flared up following Speight's coup.

It was not clear how the military would react to the ruling, although senior officers earlier said they would respect the court's ruling.

Chaudhry's reaction: Mr Mahendra Chaudhry reacted to the Court of Appeal's ruling saying he was still the nation's rightful leader, a report from Sydney adds.

"The country has to move forward, things have to be normalised. Without recalling Parliament, the other alternative is for this illegal interim regime to continue and that is not in the best interest of Fiji and neither do the people want it," he told Australian Broadcasting Corp radio from New Delhi.

THE STATESMAN

- 2 MAR 2001