

FOCUS

Coup in Fiji and the Indian Rulers

How can the BJP-led ruling NDA coalition in India ask the coup leaders in Fiji to reinstate the Chaudhry-led government? How can they ask the chauvinists in Fiji not to amend the non-discriminatory Constitution of Fiji? How the Indian ruling parties can ask the Fijians not to do things that they themselves want to do?

by Dr Ram Dulal Bhowmick

approved a new constitution giving ethnic Fijians political supremacy. Rabuka became the Prime Minister after his Sogosoq ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) party, backed by the traditional Chiefs of the indigenous Fijians, captured most of the parliamentary seats. But, later on, the isolation by the international community coupled with the economic morass Fiji was getting into forced Rabuka to revert to multi-ethnic parliamentary democracy.

In 1997 Rabuka and Jai Ram Reddy, the leader of the then dominant ethnic Indian political party, the National Federation Party (NFP), agreed to a compromise Constitution that would give equal rights to ethnic Fijians and ethnic Indians. A new Constitution was approved which agreed on a multi-ethnic executive government with 71 seats. Everyone hoped then that the new constitution would lead to a power-sharing arrangement between SVT of Rabuka and NFP of Reddy in the next parliamentary elections. But the next parliamentary elections held under the new Constitution in May 1999 generated quite different results. In the elections, both SVT and NFP were dumped by the voters, and a three-party coalition headed by the Fiji Labour Party won 70 per cent of the seats. Mahendra Chaudhry, the leader of the Fiji Labour Party and the Finance Minister in the short-lived 1987 government, was sworn in as Fiji's first Prime Minister of Indian origin. When in May 2000 Chaudhry-led government was celebrating its first anniversary that heralded the return of their multi-ethnic rule, a protest march of 10,000 ethnic Fijians against Chaudhry's 'arrogant rule' was organised. While the march was taking place, George Speight with his armed men stormed the Parliament and staged the coup.

It is well known that George Speight had personal grudges against Mahendra Chaudhry. Agriculture Minister Poseci Binne, on order from Chaudhry, sacked Speight from his post as the chairman of the public sector Fiji Pine board and as the chief executive of Fiji Hardwood Corporation on charges of corruption and mismanagement involving millions of dollars. It is reported that Speight was also being further investigated for these charges. Earlier in 1999, Speight was dismissed by a British insurance company for dishonesty. Nonetheless, it cannot be said that Speight's personal grudges against Chaudhry were the main reason behind the coup; the grudges may have prompted Speight to take the leadership in coup. There are valid reasons to believe from the after-coup role of Rabuka (who is now the Chairman of the influential Great Council of Chiefs of the ethnic Fijians) and others that more influential forces of ethnic chauvinism are behind the coup. These ethnic chauvinists fear that they will ultimately lose their clout in any multi-ethnic power sharing. The Constitution is already abrogated by the Martial Law Commander Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama (Bainimarama led the fourth coup seizing power from the President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and promulgated the martial law). Now, the process is in motion to change the Constitution again to further restrict Indo-Fijians' rights, including not allowing any Indo-Fijian to become the country's Prime Minister or other elected key executives.

There are many reasons for this to be concerned by these developments in Fiji. Firstly, ethnic Indians are well established in many developing countries of the world, for example, Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, South Africa, Kenya, even in far away Surinam of Africa. They are doing very well in business, and many of them are holding key government posts such as Cabinet Ministers (and, besides Chaudhry of Fiji, more than one of them were Prime Minister in other countries also). Earlier, Idi Amin expelled the ethnic Indians from Uganda on the charge of their supremacy in economy over the indigenous Ugandans. Now, the Fiji episodes may inspire ethno-

racial chauvinism in other countries that may target ethnic Indians. Secondly, as a member of the Commonwealth, India shall have to be concerned on ethno-racial discrimination in any Commonwealth country, and additionally when the discriminated people are of Indian origin. Thirdly, these Indo-Fijians have many relatives in India who are active through political and social pressure groups in pressuring the Indian government to act against the coup and the discriminatory measures targeting the Indo-Fijians. (However, the possibility of influx of refugees in India from Fiji is quite low. After the 1987 coup, more than 70,000 Indo-Fijians left Fiji, but most of them emigrated to New Zealand, Australia, Canada and USA. This time also India seems not an option.) Moreover, there are many international instances of helping ethnically related people in crisis. One recent and prominent example of this is use of his ethnic identity by the US President Bill Clinton (who is an ethnic Irish) in resolving the crisis in Northern Ireland. So, we find that the State of India has legitimate interest in the coup in Fiji, and it also has moral responsibility to stand against the ethno-racial chauvinism targeting the Indo-Fijians. India already sent a high-ranking special envoy from its foreign ministry to Fiji, and is reportedly in close contact with Australia and New Zealand to pressurise Fiji so that the Chaudhry-led government is reinstated and the Indo-Fijians are not discriminated against.

Now, we have an important question. A very valid one indeed. Though India has legitimate interest and moral responsibility concerning the coup in Fiji, its feelings and activities against this coup are morally justified and internationally credible and acceptable only when it itself believes and practices non-discrimination of its own citizens. Does India itself believe and practice this non-discrimination? Let us examine. The Constitution of India has a single, uniform category

of citizenship — whether by birth, descent, registration or by naturalisation. Anyone having Indian citizenship can run for an elected office, high or low, by fulfilling certain minimum conditions relating to age etc. In Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution, the right not to be discriminated against on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth is treated as a fundamental right, and this right is guaranteed to all citizens irrespective of the manner of acquisition of citizenship. The right to equality in matters relating to 'employment or appointment to any office under the State', that is guaranteed by Article 16, is a fundamental right and part of 'the basic structure of the Constitution'. It cannot be amended or abridged by Parliament; the 'basic structure of the Constitution' is inviolable. Again, the India Constitution makes all citizens eligible specifically for the high elective posts of President, Vice-President and Prime Minister (Articles 58, 66 and 84).

But, we cannot equally say that the present Indian ruling coalition parties and their leadership (and, also some influential others in the opposition) are non-discriminatory in their beliefs as well as practices. Consider their 'foreigner-cannot-be-Prime Minister' stance against the All India Congress (Indira) party president Sonia Gandhi. Before the 1999 parliamentary elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), its parent organisation the Rastriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS), and other parties of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) questioned the 'Indianness' and patriotism of Italian-born Sonia Gandhi (a naturalised Indian since 1983). They campaigned vigorously that a person of 'foreign origin' should not be the Prime Minister of India. They additionally gave a religious/communal twist to this 'foreign origin' issue by terming the elections as that of 'Ram Vs Rome'. In addition to these parties, even a section of the Congress (Indira) itself, led by former Defense Minister Sharad Pawar and former Parliament Speaker P A Sangma, openly challenged the projection of Sonia Gandhi as the candidate for Prime Ministership because of her 'foreign origin' (Pawar and Sangma were, in effect, expelled from the party and they formed the Nationalist Indian Congress Party (BJP) and its allies in the

present ruling NDA coalition and NIC included in their election manifestoes a promise to amend the Constitution to restrict high elected posts such as the offices of President, Vice-President and Prime Minister to 'natural born' citizens of India. This discriminatory effort, if succeeds, may have other grave consequences. The noted columnist Praful Bidwai writes: 'Once divisions are introduced into the notion of citizenship, by whatever criterion, the door is opened for all other kinds of exclusion: language, religion, ritual purity, education, "competence"... Muslims, Christians and Parsis can be pronounced largely "alien" in contrast to Hindus because their religions originated abroad...' (Frontline, 18 June 1999).

Then, what do we find? Firstly, citizen's right to equality in matters relating to appointment to any elected post under the State is guaranteed in the Constitution, both in Fiji and India. Secondly, proponents of chauvinist hypernationalism, both in Fiji (George Speight and his backers) and India (BJP-led ruling NDA coalition, RSS, NIC), demand that no citizen of 'foreign origin' should hold the high elected posts under the State, including that of Prime Minister. Thirdly, these chauvinists, again both in Fiji and India, want to amend their respective Constitution to the effect that the high posts including that of Prime Minister cannot be held by any citizen (of the State) of 'foreign origin'. Fourthly, while Speight and his backers staged a coup to amend the Constitution in Fiji, BJP-led NDA coalition, RSS and NIC in India want to amend the Constitution through the parliamentary process. That is, for both the groups (in Fiji and India), the end is the same, only the means are different. Fifthly, BJP-led NDA coalition, RSS and NIC are so desperate in preventing any Indian citizen of 'foreign origin' to the post of Prime Minister that they even want to amend the inviolable basic structure of the Constitution that cannot be amended by the Parliament. Now, how can the BJP-led ruling NDA coalition in India ask the coup leaders in Fiji to reinstate the Chaudhry-led government? How can they ask the chauvinists in Fiji not to amend the non-discriminatory Constitution of Fiji? How the Indian ruling parties can ask the Fijians not to do things that they themselves want to do? It is clearly a double standard. And, hypocrisy. No less.

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AILING POWER SECTOR

Whither Cure?

The new global marketing strategies predict that the role of the PDB has to be down-graded, with more patronization of the private sector

by A M M Aabad

THE Bangladesh Power Development Board (PDB) is apparently caught facing a big BMR (not BMRE) problem, with its over-aged and overused generating plants, and the power demand rising steeply over the 1990s. This accelerated demand should have been anticipated officially, through forward planning exercises, resulting in a few confirmed and approved projects of five to ten years' duration. This is a separate exercise from the development of new plants under the private and public sectors. Installing a new plant takes an average of two to three years, excluding the time for negotiation and contract signing period.

The new PDB Chairman rightly pointed out that load-shedding and interruptions would be lingering for quite some time, to allow extended periods for overdue maintenance work. One problem in the developing countries is the perpetual shortage of foreign exchange under the current account; and, secondly, the lack of priority to maintenance proposals (inventory control becomes a problem). The bureaucracy has to be more technically minded, so as to reduce the communication gap with the technical departments of the various ministries.

Overhauling is a costly and time-consuming exercise, and it has to be approached (from the management point of view) in a formal and professional manner, keeping in view the unpredictable processing period, which has to be extended time and again. But technical credibility (with the superior authorities) is low in the LDCs; resulting in greater time-lags between proposals and approvals. Due to weaknesses in the infrastructure (especially in the public sector), the project completion period has to be invariably extended as the facilitator inputs are not able to match the time tables in the blue prints, especially in regard to the essential services.

The system of colonial bureaucracy is unsuitable for essential public utility services, after the withdrawal of the colonial rule, due to the sudden

disruption in supplies and management culture from the 'home' base. In Dhaka, this happened twice, initially from 1947, and again since 1971. During the initial decades since independence, the private sector lacked the background and the resources to tackle the essential services, due to underdevelopment and lack of experience, and absence of the root culture. This phase is now changing, and the private sector is responding in a positive manner, aided with foreign technical assistance and investment tie-ups. Luckily the trained human resources base is not a critical problem.

In short, the maintenance budgets of the technical departments in the public sector have to be accorded much higher priorities at the Secretariate level (compare the plight of the SOEs, and the low percentage of funds made available for R&D). For the recurring foreign exchange component to be reduced, the heavy electrical engineering local industry has to be developed in the private sector (it appears to be viable for a market of 130m population).

The new global marketing strategies predict that the role of the PDB has to be down-graded, with more patronization of the private sector (this is now being cultivated). Due to the broader base of the economically-handicapped consumers, subsidies in the national budget have lingered too long. Now that the growth rate is above five per cent, the culture of subsidies has to be down-played. Another cultural nuisance is containing the rising systems losses in the human resources area due to corrupt practices. This epidemic is imported from the existing local environment, led by the quality of governance at the top (who cannot evade the share of the responsibility).

The final equation is how to make PDB more lean and trim, shedding off the excessive administrative and operational loads, the creation of a national power development authority might be an efficient outlet.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Cuban-Americans have Lost Much More than Elian Gonzalez

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

THE wheels of justice turned slowly. When it stopped turning on June 28, 6-year old Elian Gonzalez was free to go back to Cuba to his real relatives, and the pseudo relatives in Miami were busy badmouthing American justice. After they appointed the hard-drinking, semiliterate car mechanic Lazaro Gonzalez their spokesperson, the Cuban-Americans could not have expected anything better.

Imagine being afraid to speak one's mind, or dreading to make a phone call to the media expressing a contrary point of view out of fear of reprisal. Imagine a majority intolerant of any dissent. Are we describing a totalitarian state such as Cuba? Are we describing the atrocious behaviour of the "commie" citizens of Big Havana, Cuba? No, we are describing the intolerance of the Cuban-American community of Little Havana, Miami, USA!

With Elian back home in Cuba, and passions cooling somewhat, several Cuban-Americans came out of the woodwork with horror stories. Those who wanted to speak in favour of Elian's father's right to have the custody of his son, were not only threatened with dire consequences, Cuban-American talk show hosts refused to take their calls! Who can forget the ugly scene when Cuban-American gangs de-

scended on and manhandled two American women holding posters supporting Attorney General Janet Reno? Clearly, some Cuban-Americans have assumed the attributes of their perceived enemy very well.

Cuban-Americans still lament that "America does not get it!" Oblivious of their own totalitarian behaviour they cry, "How can you let a boy go back to a totalitarian state?" The fact is the Cuban-Americans don't get it. Having fled Cuba, they cannot conceive anyone willingly going back to Cuba. By going back to Cuba Juan Miguel Gonzalez, Elian's father, destroyed all the self-serving myths about the Cuban hell that the Cuban-American community had built up meticulously over the past 40 years. Not that the Cuban-Americans had not tried to dissuade Juan Miguel Gonzalez by offering bribes of millions of dollars to defect. If defection was on Juan Miguel Gonzalez's mind, he had ample opportunities when he was surrounded by only US Marines in his first hideout. Better still, he only had to utter the word in Janet Reno's office, when he was alone with the Attorney General, the nation's chief law enforcing officer. Juan Miguel Gonzalez steadfastly refused to oblige the Miami Cuban-Americans!

Cuban-Americans alarmed the justice department by

parading Elian in front of the cameras for political purposes; something a real parent would never do. Did anyone see a Press photo of Elian while he was in the US in his father's custody, or now in Cuba? Juan Miguel Gonzalez vowed never to allow cameras in front of his son ever, even in Cuba — spoken like a true parent, not a "relative." Cuban-Americans attempted to block the return of the boy to his father because they equated paternal custody to delivering Elian to Fidel Castro, although by this time such claims were beginning to ring hollow. Interestingly, Fidel Castro was a hero in the US after he overthrew the corrupt dictator Batista in 1959. He was a sought after speaker on American college campuses. By 1960, however, Castro switched his allegiance to Soviet communism, became an anti-American rabble-rouser, earning America's undying enmity.

Cuban-Americans had not figured on the American legal system, which for so long had pampered them, taking a different view. All the parties were allowed to make their arguments in court, with the federal judges ruling that only the parent can speak for the young boy in an asylum case. The parent wanted to return to Cuba. Finally, the Supreme Court rejected an emergency request from the child's Miami rela-

tives to keep him in the United States.

The fallout from the case is uniformly detrimental to the cause of the Cuban-Americans. As the *New York Times* observed: "The image of the Cuban-American community in Miami, however, has suffered because of its belligerence in disrupting family ties between father and son. The posturing by Miami's (Cuban-American) leaders in refusing to aid federal authorities was insupportable. Miami city politics have become more divisive than ever."

On the national scene, the anti-Castro lobby has hurt its message by seeming to use a child as a political prop. Perhaps most harmful to that cause is that many Americans came to sympathize with Elian's father and became more aware of America's outdated policy of isolation towards Cuba. It is not perhaps surprising that just one day before Elian's flight home, the House Republican leaders agreed to end four decades of sanctions on food sales to Cuba. The saga of this Cuban child helped to hasten that shift in policy.

Elian and Juan Miguel Gonzalez are both safely home in Cuba. The question is: will the Cuban-American community allow Attorney General Janet Reno to return to her home in Miami safely?

by Jim Davis

Garfield



James Bond



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