

# Fiji's Mercenary Military, the US and the Politics of Coup D'etat

Andre Vltchek

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From Suva. Fiji is living in fear. Many of those who used to speak openly about social, political and racial injustice in this once idyllic archipelago are still silently waiting for the situation to improve and for the wave of fright to subside. The military coup which took place on 5 December 2006 was hardly one of history's bloodiest, but again it managed to plant seeds of uncertainty in troubled Fijian soil. On that day, Commodore Josaia (Frank) Voreqe Bainimarama overthrew the elected government of Laisenia Qarase in Fiji's fourth coup d'état in just two decades.

There is clearly not much to look forward to. Strongman Bainimarama (who after the coup became "Interim Prime Minister") announced on July 18 that there would be no elections next year (2009) as was earlier promised. His government said electoral reforms needed to be carried out before Fiji could go to the polls. Bainimarama had previously taken control of Fiji after leading a counter-coup in May 2000, before handing over power in July to President Josefa Iloilo.



**Commodore Bainimarama (Fiji Times photograph)**

There is little that Fijian citizens can do in the face of the coup; the military is in full control. And it is showing muscle not only at home but also in the international arena, acting confidently even arrogantly, ready to confront the countries it historically depends on, like New Zealand, Australia, even the sole superpower. Postponement of elections evoked sharp disapproval from Canberra, whose Foreign Affairs Minister Stephen Smith criticized the Interim government. But the issue quickly passed.

Diplomatic squabbles involving Fiji have become routine. In July 2007, Bainimarama accused the United States ambassador of spreading misleading information about his coup, comparing the envoy to a New Zealand diplomat he expelled for allegedly meddling in the country's affairs. The coup was followed by sanctions from the European Union and partial sanctions from Australia, with devastating effects on Fiji's vulnerable and stagnating

economy.

What makes this miniscule army so confident? Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMS) are among the smallest armies in the world, with total manpower of 3,500 on active duty and with 15,000 reservists. Three hundred men serve in the navy. Nevertheless, the locations where Fijian soldiers are deployed are “cosmopolitan”: two regular battalions of the Fiji Infantry Regiment are regularly stationed overseas on peacekeeping duties; the 1st Battalion has been posted to Lebanon, Iraq, and East Timor under UN command, while the 2nd Battalion is stationed in Sinai with the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO). The 3rd Battalion is stationed in the capital, Suva, and the remaining three are spread throughout the islands.

Nevertheless, this small force carried out four major coups since Fijian independence in 1970. The country was shaken by two coups in 1987, the mutiny at Queen Elisabeth Barracks in Suva as well as the coup of 2000, prior to the latest coup of December 2006. Earlier coups had devastated Fiji by reopening racial divides between native Melanesian Fijians and Indians whose many ancestors were brought to this country by the British colonial power as slave labor, first predominantly Hindus from Calcutta. A later wave of voluntary predominantly Muslim migrants came from Gujarat. In the late 80s, Indo-Fijians were a majority, but racial discrimination and the coups and accompanying violence, looting of Indian business and rape of Indian women, triggered an exodus of thousands of the best-trained professionals. Indo-Fijians again became a minority.

The Fijian military (RFMF) is larger than that any other of Pacific island nation and it is extremely well “connected” to international power brokers. It is also “independently wealthy” as a result of controlling several questionable mercenary schemes supportive of

foreign interventions of both the United States and United Kingdom. More than 3000 Fijians serve in the British Army. Some of those mercenaries were once active members of the Fijian army. The government allows soldiers, particularly officers, to transit from military service to join private security firms, which in turn pay it a fee.

In May 2007, *The Age* (Melbourne) reported “The United Nations has called on Fiji to get tough on firms recruiting mercenaries in the South Pacific country. In a statement on Friday a UN working group called on Fiji to create laws to tackle the problem of mercenaries, and to sign on to the 1989 International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries. ‘The working group notes with concern that in a number of instances the activities carried out by Fijians abroad may qualify as mercenary-related activities,’ the UN group said. In 2005, Fiji mercenaries were found working on the Papua New Guinea autonomous island province of Bougainville, where they were reportedly training the private army of a notorious conman. The UN said people in Fiji also had been recruited by dubious private security firms to undertake work in Iraq.”



**Fijian Parliament**

I was able to interview one of the retired top

brass of the Fijian military. Not supporting the most recent coup d'état he prefers to remain anonymous:

"The Fijian military had been serving in many conflict zones as a UN peacekeeping force", he explains. "But some of its active or retired members were contracted directly by the UK or the US governments. The Fijian military for instance worked on one Iraq project code-named "Filous" (the Arabic term for currency exchange of). The goal of this project was to exchange Saddam's currency for the new money. Fijian soldiers are very familiar with Arabs and their culture. Our soldiers have served in Lebanon, the Sinai Desert and elsewhere."

"The Fijian military actually expanded through UN peacekeeping operations in Lebanon, in 1978. The UN invited Fiji to join the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Under the British, Fijians had served in many parts of the world, including Malaya. Our soldiers are known for their excellence. They are trained locally, but also in Australia, New Zealand, the US and the UK. Fijian military and the US military are very close; we used to have excellent relations. Since the 2006 coup the US has frozen all new cooperation, although existing projects can still go on. One more important issue to mention is that the US security companies often directly contract retired Fijian soldiers who then serve in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. For Fiji it is tremendous business."

It is a well known fact that Fiji is a major recruitment ground for mercenaries. But at home, the issue is taboo or at least free of criticism. With the money continuing to come back to Fiji, there is little public questioning. In post-September 11 world battlefields, the Fijian military is 'marketing' not only its active duty soldiers and reservists, but also more than 20,000 unemployed former troops. Remittances are essential for the survival of many families.

A soldier stationed abroad can send up to 2,000 dollars a month, a huge amount in Fiji, yet a great bargain for the UK or the US where the military personnel with similar experience employed in combat zones can easily cost 50,000 dollars or more a month.



### Homes of the poor in Suva. Fertile ground for military recruitment

On November 1, 2007, the Fiji Times carried an interview (conducted by Pacific News) with Sakiusa Raivoce, a retired Fijian colonel and director of Security Support, the biggest of the country's six mercenary employment agencies. Raivoce observed that "Private armies became a viable commercial enterprise the moment America invaded Iraq... The time is right, and our price is right."

His statements were echoed in the same newspaper (Fiji Times) by Lieutenant-Colonel Mosese Tikoitoga, 46, senior officer in the junta led by Voreqe Bainimarama, and a former UN peacekeeper: "We made a conscious decision to create an army bigger than we need to generate foreign currency. Our economy has no choice but to build armies, and it's a good business... There are few other foreign investments. If we didn't do this, our people would be in the street creating havoc." He added that more than 1000 Fijians were stationed throughout the Middle East for



private armies under the corporate command of Global Strategies, Triple Canopy, Armor Group International, DynCorp International, Control Solutions and Sandline International.

“Fiji is not a particularly rich country”, explained one of Fiji’s top international consultants. She prefers to remain anonymous. “We need money and frankly we don’t care what our soldiers are doing abroad. Killing others, being involved in bad causes? It’s not our problem. Sorry for being so blunt, but that’s how we feel here.” Similar views are shared by many Fijians.

For years, the Fijian military was given carte blanche by the local population. But now the price is being paid as the army brings its combat-zone practices and morals to the streets of Fijian cities and villages.

Shortly after the latest coup, the Executive Director of the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM), Virisila Buadromo and her partner were arrested and taken to the military barracks. “I was threatened and insulted, beaten and humiliated”, she recalled. “Eventually, soldiers threw me on the floor and began jumping on my stomach. Since the coup I have been receiving anonymous phone calls; some of them openly threatening members of our organization with rape.”



### **Virisila Buadromo, Executive Director of the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM)**

The regime - which has previously warned that it will round up reporters seen to be undermining it - has admitted to having a "blacklist" of people it will prevent from leaving Fiji”, according to Xavier La Canna of Adelaide Now.

Joseph Veramu, a leading Fijian novelist and head of the Lautoka (Fiji’s second largest city) Campus of University of the South Pacific (USP) shares his emotions: “Yes, there is definitely fear. People are suddenly scared to speak out, to make a comment and be overheard by a passer-by. The military managed to plant small, tiny seeds of fear in our society. And then there is reason for real fear as some people are truly suffering, like those who were taken in; dragged to the military barracks.”

Concerns over the possibility of the worst human rights abuses have not materialized. The situation is tense, but people are not disappearing and there have been no recent reports of torture. Military cleared the roadblocks from the streets of Suva and withdrew to their barracks. There are presently proportionately fewer soldiers on the streets of Suva than in Manila or Bangkok. Outright opposition and outspoken critics are being intimidated and sometimes humiliated, but there seems to be no consistent physical violence against them.



### The military took over some coastal villas in Suva

The junta leaders of the 2006 coup gave corruption in government as well as pending legislation to pardon those soldiers involved in the 2000 mutiny as the main reasons for their action. Leaders of the coup then called for national reconciliation. That was in sharp contrast to previous coups when the Indian population suffered mightily. A substantial part of the population (including the majority of Indo-Fijians) supports the present Interim Government.

“The situation is absurd”, declared Tongan novelist Epeli Hau’ofa in an interview for this article. Mr. Hau’ofa is one of the greatest writers of the Pacific islands and a long time professor at USP in the capital city of Suva. “Military coup is always bad news, but the recent one in Fiji was at least not racially motivated; on the contrary. Leaders of the coup, including Commodore Bainimarama, called for equality for the two main ethnic groups living on these isles – native Fijians and Indo-Fijians. This may be the only and the last chance for national reconciliation in Fiji.”

“The United States and Australia – and Australia is nothing else than the right hand of the United States in this part of the world – are putting great pressure on the interim military

government. Sanctions are being imposed – sanctions that are harming simple people, not the elites, not the military. In the meantime, the military – the very same military that performed 4 coups in the last two decades – is allowed, even encouraged, to serve in the US- and UK-controlled areas in the Middle East and Afghanistan.”



### Guarding the US embassy in Suva

“The Fijian army had been created by the UK after the Second World War”, continued Mr. Hau’ofa. “It is simply a mercenary force that was designed to be engaged in conflicts triggered by the US and UK, while allowing native Fijians to make money. I say native Fijians, because it almost exclusively consists of native Fijians. Indians were not invited to join after they sent The Crown to hell during World War II. Today, in Iraq and Afghanistan, Fijian soldier-mercenaries are known as the toughest guards around.”

But Fijian mercenaries are not operating only in far away shores; they are gaining notoriety even in their own region of Melanesia. Since the end of 2005, three “waves” of former Fijian soldiers were either employed or trying to make their way to Bougainville, the breakaway province of Papua New Guinea bordering the Solomon Islands. Nine were detained in Bougainville itself and others were arrested by

the Solomon Island authorities and deported back to Fiji.



### Suva Prison

An anecdote often repeated in Suva says that right after the 25 December 2005 coup d'état, the Fijian military took over the streets of the capital and began erecting roadblocks. There was no real use for the roadblocks, but that's what the military had learned during its service in the Middle East and that is what it began implementing at home.



### Roadblocks on the streets in Suva

The military leaders of the United States and the UK should spend at least a few moments studying the wisdom of that story. A small chain of islands in the middle of the Pacific had

been designated as supplier of the cannon fodder for the Kingdom simply because its people were very big and obedient, and they had been excellent warriors in the past. Fijians went to war for money and eventually they stopped questioning whether their involvement in the conflicts was right or wrong. War became their lucrative business.

What kind of society can be raised on such ethics? What can one expect from an army that fights for a fee? It was only a matter of time before it would bring its cynicism and twisted morals to the doorsteps of its own home.

A tiny nation of 900,000 inhabitants, Fiji does not need an army. It faces no external threat. By implanting it here, The UK did a great wrong to the Fijian people. By using it as it did, the US continued in the same tradition. There should be no sanctions against Fiji. Instead, there should be some compensation for the harm inflicted, as well as insistence that Fiji dismantles its military and becomes, once again, respectful and peaceful nation.

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His earlier articles on the Pacific Island nations at Japan Focus include:

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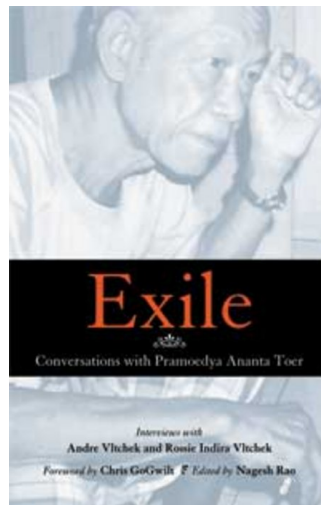
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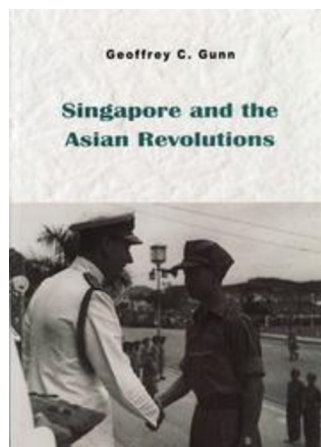
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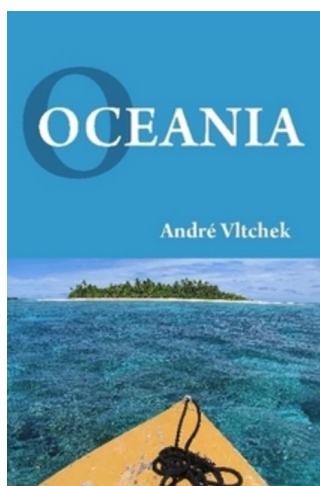
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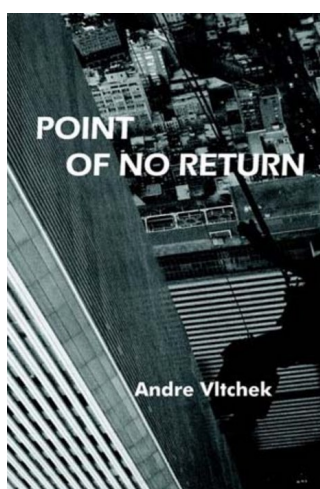
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