

# Fiji coup puts crown, nation in crisis

by Mary McCourt

Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka created a crisis not only in his Pacific island nation of Fiji when he staged a second military coup there on Sept. 25—he also created the biggest crisis the Commonwealth Crown has faced in over 20 years. The issue in Fiji is political domination of the ethnic Melanese, now a numerical minority, of the country's parliament and government. The issue in the Commonwealth is the authority of the Queen.

Queen Elizabeth used her authority not as Queen of Britain but as Queen and head of state of Fiji, to warn Fijians that they would be committing treason to the Crown if they attempted to carry through Colonel Rabuka's declaration of a republic. The potential crisis is greater than when Rhodesia issued its "illegal" Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965, because the Queen's statement on Fiji, broadcast by the British Broadcasting Company Sept. 29, was, "perhaps, the strongest political statement made by the monarch as head of state of a Commonwealth country, and was unprecedented," the British daily *Independent* wrote Sept. 30.

The Queen's statement said that "For her part, Her Majesty continues to regard" the Governor-General Sir Penaia Ganilau "as her representative and the sole legitimate source of executive authority" in the islands. "Anyone who seeks to remove the Governor-General from office would in effect be repudiating his allegiance and loyalty to the Queen. Her Majesty hopes that even now the process of restoring Fiji to constitutional normality might be resumed. Many Fijians hold firm their allegiance to the Crown and to the Governor-General as the Queen's personal representative," the statement continued.

The British Foreign Office made clear Sept. 29 that the Queen's statement was made independent of the British government. Advisers to Foreign Minister Sir Geoffrey Howe are worried that the situation in Suva, the Fijian capital, could become irrevocable if Colonel Rabuka thinks he is boxed in. The Fijians are known historically for being fierce fighters; Rabuka himself was awarded an Order of the British Empire for his service in Lebanon leading the Fiji Infantry Regiment for his "imagination and innovation while confronting and restraining the PLO guerrillas," the *Independent* reported.

According to a British source, the Queen's powerful private secretary Sir William Heseltine has put together a consortium of advisers on the crisis, comprising representatives of the governments of Britain, Australia, and New Zealand,

as well as Commonwealth Secretary General Sir Shidra (Sonny) Ramphal. Although there are signs that, perhaps in response to the pressure from the Crown, Colonel Rabuka may be hesitating on declaring a republic, the source continued, "if he pushes to the bitter end, the Queen will have egg on her face."

If the crisis is not resolved, the Queen could face political embarrassment at the Commonwealth summit in October in Vancouver, Canada. If Rabuka declares a republic, Fiji will have to leave the Commonwealth, and will most likely be refused re-entry—despite the fact that a number of member-nations are run by military governments.

The coup was staged as negotiations between Dr. Timoci Bavadra, whose newly elected government was ousted in the May coup, and Fijian *éminence grise* Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, and Sir Penaia, agreed Sept. 23 to an interim government giving equal number of cabinet portfolios to both political parties. The interim government under Sir Penaia was linked to a new body to discuss constitutional change in Fiji, which would have drawn in equal number from the rival parties and attempted to legislate relations within a multi-racial and multi-community society. The Queen gave full approval to the interim government. Rabuka saw the government as a threat to Melanesian domination of the parliament.

Tensions have been escalating between the two largest ethnic groups in Fiji: the Melanesians—46% of the population; and fourth- or fifth-generation descendants of the Indians first brought to Fiji by the British to cut sugar cane, now 49% of the population, and by far the most prosperous. Violence has broken out, especially because of the very recent growth of the Taukei "movement"—extremist Fijian nationalists reinforced by thugs and unemployed youth.

Fiji could now face a bad economic crisis. Precious foreign exchange has been lost in the past six months due to economic protests by the Indian-ethnic population, who held back for six weeks harvesting of the sugar crops—they own most of the farms—which earn 60% of the island's foreign earnings. The greatest danger for Fiji is internal chaos. As the *Daily Telegraph* noted Sept. 29, tensions exist as much between the affluent eastern region of Fiji and the backward western part, as between Indians and Melanesians. It was a coalition of poor Melanesians and Indians who voted Timoci Bavadra into power in May.

In recent months, the Fijian nationalist movement Taukei—which means "original home"—has been leading arson and physical attacks on Indians, and reportedly is calling for the Indians to be repatriated. During talks between Bavadra and former Prime Minister Ratu Mara, Bavadra's spokesman was savagely beaten by a band of Fijians in full tribal dress, wielding clubs, calling themselves Taukei warriors. Last month, according to the London *Times*, the Taukei caused revulsion in Suva, the capital, when they staged an anti-Indian demonstration with "unmistakable overtones of cannibalism."