

The Politics of Literature¹

Murray Bramwell

On June 22 last year Som Prakash, a post-graduate student at Flinders and lecturer in English at the University of the South Pacific was supervising examinations when Fijian troops turned up and hauled him off to Queen Elizabeth Barracks. Under the draconian terms of the Internal Security Decree the security forces can hold people for periods of up to two years without explanation or trial. The minister responsible for the Decree is Brigadier General (he was a Colonel until he promoted himself) Sitiveni Rabuka. The vague reasons given for Som Prakash's arrest had to do with alleged involvement in arms smuggling, an activity now linked with the extremist Taukei faction and never with pacifist Indian intellectuals.

The real reason for Prakash being among the first Fijian citizens interned, is that in a modest publication entitled *Coup and Crisis: Fiji a Year Later*, he contributed a book review of Eddie Dean's authorised biography *Rabuka - No Other Way*. *Coup and Crisis* sold its first run of 300 copies in 48 hours. A reprint of 2,000 was being prepared when Som Prakash was seized.

Within days of his arrest, news reached Adelaide that Som was in solitary confinement and had been severely beaten. Eye-witnesses reported that soldiers taking him from the campus had roughed him up and made taunting references to his review. Friends trying to contact Som and his wife Sophie were met with vague and conflicting reports. As days went by there was mounting concern for Som Prakash's safety.

At Flinders, Sudesh Mishra, postgrad student in the Centre for Research in New Literatures in English and a close friend of Som, together with Director of the Centre, Syd Harrex, and Dr. Bob Teasdale from the

School of Education, began making representations to Foreign Affairs department officials in Canberra after verifying reports with ABC Radio correspondent Jemima Garrett.

On June 27 a letter signed by forty two members of academic staff including seven professors from Flinders urged the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Lovering to ensure Som Prakash's immediate release and safe return to Adelaide to resume his Ph.D studies under the Australian government IDP Fellowship Programme. The following day the Vice-Chancellor sent an urgent request to Foreign Affairs to expedite matters as quickly as possible.

The reply from Canberra six days later made matters clear. Australian authorities were concerned about the severity of the Decree and were particularly insistent that reports of Som's ill-treatment be explained by the Fijian government.

But despite the swift and forthright pressure from Flinders and the department in Canberra, Som was still in custody. Sophie was required to take food to the barracks each day but was not permitted to see her husband. Som, by this stage, was in a deteriorated physical and mental condition as the result of isolation and torture. Visiting Red Cross representatives described him as being severely disorientated and they had fears for his well-being.

All this for writing a book review.

On July 4 friends and supporters in Adelaide began a second wave of pressure for Som's release. Individual MP's, particularly John Langmore and Gordon Bilney, had been active in Canberra and diplomatic efforts were continuing but apart from an article in *The Canberra Times* the issue had received very little publicity.

That was all to change when Sudesh Mishra and Bob Teasdale were interviewed by Julia Lester on the Philip Satchell Show on ABC Radio and the item was then picked up by ABC News and the PM programme. The following day Mike McEwen of *The Advertiser* reported the story giving a good summary of the events to date. The combination of these initiatives and the fact that Rabuka was refused an entry visa to promote his book in Australia saw the Fijian authorities reconsider their position.

However, even at this stage they were still sending out conflicting reports. A telex in reply to a letter of concern from Dr. John Rice on behalf of the Flinders University Staff Association persisted both with denials of ill-treatment and preposterous accusations that the arrest was linked with investigations of arms shipments to Fiji.

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This was mere bluster, however. On July 6 after fourteen days detention Som Prakash was released. The conditions of his release amounted to virtual house arrest. Som could not discuss his experience with anyone, particularly the media, and in the following weeks he was intimidated and assaulted by troops barging into his house. A roster of colleagues from the University of the South Pacific was setup so that people could stay with Som and his family at all times in case of further attempts at harassment.

At the same time further communication between representatives from the International Development Programme and Mr. Geoffrey Caston, the Vice Chancellor at USP, set plans in process for Som and his family to return to Adelaide to resume his studies.

His friends and colleagues were delighted to welcome Som Prakash when he finally arrived in early September. He is a man of great courage and integrity whose indomitable spirit is exemplary. The conduct of the Fijian authorities, on the other hand, has caused the gravest doubts about their regard for even the most basic human rights.

To arrest and torture a man for a balanced, legitimate piece of writing under a dubious but dangerous Decree, made *retrospective* to cover the review's publication date, should cause grave concern to all freedom-lovers - and not only the academics at Flinders who participated actively in the release of an innocent writer and in the ending of an outrage. If you consider the following review to be subversive or unfair, you should read the book it reviews.

Author

Murray Bramwell was Lecturer, Drama and formerly Union Welfare Officer at Flinders University when he wrote this article (Summer 1988).