

Rabuka's *No Other Way*¹

Som Prakash

As the title and all the thirty odd photographs pointedly indicate, *Rabuka No Other Way* is virtually all about the man who has dramatically changed the course of Fiji's history: Sitiveni Rabuka. Symbolically perhaps, Rabuka's target race gets the honour of a singular photograph in the image of Mrs. Irene Jai Narayan, the military and the interim government's choice as the Minister for Indian Affairs. (Mrs. Narayan lost in the last elections, comprehensively rejected by the Indian community, 'on whom the coup impacted' most - to use one of the less fortunate phrases of the book.) The authors proclaim at the outset that the book is based on Rabuka's viewpoint unfolding his 'words, thoughts, motivations and justifications'. Whether the real motive is money, vanity or self-justification, the reader cannot escape the nagging feeling that Rabuka suffers from a mixture of pride, desperation, guilt and, most importantly perhaps, self-pity.

Of the 12 chapters of the book, at least five discuss religion in one form or another. Rabuka sees himself as an old-fashioned prophet of God commissioned to do a coup to save his people and turn all the 'heathens', the Indians, into Christians by legal if not evangelical means. ('I want the Indians to be converted to Christianity' ... 'efforts will be made to convert them ... ') Given the fundamentalist nature of his religious fervour, it comes as somewhat of a surprise that he thinks the Sunday observance rules are being applied too sweepingly and zealously by 'some fanatics who are trying to make political mileage out of my coup'. Unfortunately, Rabuka is unable to see his own over zealous unchristian intolerance towards other faiths as clearly as he begins to see it in his colleagues: 'I didn't think there were people so fanatical about their religious views that they would take the attitude they did to further their beliefs.' This criti-

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cism suits no one more than Rabuka himself given his expressed views that all Indians are 'heathens' he is divinely or politically inspired to save. Presumably, this will further his own beliefs, make him more of a Christian, in some special way.

The insensitivity towards other races or religions is unfortunately not limited to Rabuka only. On several occasions the writers themselves, almost gratuitously, call the earlier Fijians and Indians cannibals and coolies respectively. They seem to be either deliberately mischievous or blissfully unaware of the furore caused by the cannibal quote of the famous 1982 Four Corners programme, or the many bits of scholarship easily available on Fiji Indian origins.

The role of the writers is interesting in other ways as well. On one hand, they seem to be implicitly endorsing all that Rabuka says without checking out the full facts; for example, Rabuka's claim of having documentary evidence of the Coalition's Libyan connections is publicly reiterated by them (see the *Fiji Times* letter of 25/4/1988). They seem to conveniently ignore that such bogus allegations have been made in the past with laughable results. (The prime example is the false alarm of the Russian letter during the 1982 elections.) On the other hand, the writers can be rather pointed in their implied criticisms or questions. Rabuka's excuse ('let bygones be bygones') for not pursuing the charges has a hollow sound about it. From Rabuka's willing confessions they are unable to highlight his many confusions and contradictions. Thus Rabuka's Christian protestations are set against his many unchristian actions and beliefs; his claims of doing the greatest favour for Fiji sharply contrast with his sad admission that paradise is lost or that the economy of the country has bled to death; his plans to encourage productivity with 100,000 Chinese or other immigrants look foolish beside his actions which have driven out so many talented people of all races, including the indigenous Fijians. Ironically enough the resultant brain drain is bound to have the greatest adverse effect on the indigenous people - the very people in whose name the two coups were undertaken and whose 'saviour' Rabuka imagines himself to be. If he sees himself as a Messiah, he has led 'his' people from the promised land into the wilderness - that is the comic tragedy of it all.

The Messiah syndrome, which is characteristic of coup-makers everywhere, is also finally responsible for the severing of our links with the British Crown and the Commonwealth. The writers highlight the tragic irony of this most unpopular consequence: one of Rabuka's reasons for the coups (which the Queen regarded as a disloyalty to her Majesty) was that he had felt the Coalition was endangering Fiji's allegiance to the British Crown.

While reiterating Rabuka's justification of the coup being a pre-emptive measure designed to avoid bloodshed, the writers, either consciously or unwittingly, reveal the real reason. Rabuka is shown to be so uncritical and partisan a supporter of the Alliance Party that he could not digest the prospect of 'his' Party's loss. Since the start of the elections he suffered from the 'strange feeling' that the Coalition was going to win because, he admits, it was attractive to Fijian intellectuals, ordinary workers and even soldiers - including senior officers. 'According to Rabuka's intelligence, more than 50% of the Fijian soldiers overseas had voted for the Coalition.' Given this kind of information, the reader feels that Rabuka was hardly letting the ordinary Fijians 'determine their own destiny'. People with vested interests or allegiances and the so-called *Taukeis* were against the Coalition; but the ordinary people were not. The average Fijian was willing to accept the change. Rabuka's claim that he 'stumbled on' to the Easter Monday meeting of the *Taukei* group at Raikivi's place will test the credulity of all but the utterly converted.

Rabuka himself makes it abundantly clear that he decided on the military option on the day the election results started to come out. Therefore it's patently clear that his other public reasons - to avoid bloodshed etc. - were mere excuses - there were no *Taukei* stirrings at that time. The book also reveals how he wanted to leave the Army because he could not support the newly elected government - because of his total, unqualified allegiance to the Alliance? The writers quote him: 'I can rest now because the coup objectives have been achieved ... the old Constitution has gone, and the Bavadra Government is no longer there.' With the benefit of hindsight we know Rabuka has not rested since his ill-considered decision to act precipitously. In fact, he is still around despite his promise to return to the barracks - he has ambitions of doing political science now.

The book also reveals how his simplistic calculations went woefully wrong. The overthrow of the Bavadra Government which led finally to the declaration of Republic was not 'for the survival of the Fijian race' but to 'legitimise his military authority'. In his Operations Order 1/87 he states he was protecting 'RFMF and national interests'. His other ill-founded assumptions were the Coalition would:

- (1) force the GG to accept policies 'against traditional interests but most importantly against interests of RFMF'
- (2) discriminate against the Fijians in Civil Service
- (3) forge fresh links with countries like Russia and Libya and move away from traditional alliances
- (4) endanger allegiance to the Queen.

How false these fears were is proved partly by the fact that it was Rabuka's own action which treacherously broke Fiji's links with the Crown finally; it is a Rabuka backed government which has brought about the establishment of the Israeli Embassy in Fiji or the strengthening of French connections. Many people feel this is an open invitation to the Libyans, Palestinians and others to de-stabilise Fiji further. All but the most gullible reader will see that the bulk of Rabuka's actions were based on some far-fetched, often self-deceived, assumptions. If they were not mere justifications after the act, they were self-fulfilling prophecies with an ironic twist: what Rabuka claims he feared others might do, he ends up doing himself.

At least for some of these actions Rabuka now seems to be sorry. One can sense a note of regret in his reluctance to see the Army continuing to play an active role in politics: 'I believe we should, from the settlement of this current problem, only be there as the final guarantor of law and order. I hope that will be our role from the time we call a general election to the end of time.' Need we to remind Rabuka that his two senior officers felt exactly that way before his coup - that their duties were professional, not political? Has Rabuka come to his senses but a bit too late? It's possible he has begun to understand that others can follow his example and do a coup on him - with a precedent set, the floodgates open.

Dean and Ritova have managed to create a character who is certainly interesting. Rabuka has what he calls 'talents for theatrics'. But, to extend the metaphor of the stage a little further, depicting their hero as a tragicomical one. Here is a man who professes loyalty to the Queen and the High Chiefs and ends up being disloyal to both; a man who acts on behalf of the *Taukeis* and the Council of Chiefs and gets disenchanted with each of the groups; a man who considers Fiji God's gift to the Fijians but refuses to allow God's hand in populating Fiji with a variety of races; a man who claims divine inspiration and yet admits making some crucial mistakes - like letting the *Taukei* have a taste of power for a while; a man who claims the cause for the first coup was imminent bloodshed while the cause of the second was that he was not consulted! The reader is left to decide whether Sitiveni Rabuka's real motivation comes from his own ego or God; whether his delusions of grandeur are pitiable or dangerous. Even if one can momentarily accept the writers' claim that Rabuka is 'comprehensively consistent in his basic aims', one is forced to question what those basic aims really are - as they keep changing all the time.

On the other hand, once in a while Rabuka is portrayed as someone only too human; for example, that he should have serious second thoughts during the final stage, about abrogating the 1970 Constitution and sever-

ing our links with the Crown, makes him much more human than those dubious advisers who virtually pressured him into taking the final plunge into republicanism. One feels sorriest for him when he admits to being somewhat 'confused by the increasing complexity of the situation' - a situation at least partly created by none other than Sitiveni Rabuka himself. The real tragedy, of course, is that the people of Fiji, now and for generations to come, will pay a bitter price for a bit of political adventurism by a third ranking officer in the Royal Fiji Military Forces, who had so much potential for doing good to our nation by choosing the other, more obvious but less dramatic, way.

Author

Som Prakash, now retired, was Lecturer in Language and Literature at the School of Humanities, University of the South Pacific, at the time this book review was written. He was subsequently arrested by the military and brutally tortured. He now stays in Sydney. Email: som-prakash33@gmail.com