Response to EPG Report to Pacific Forum

The Eminent Persons Group (EPG) has made a fair effort to get to the heart of the issues around the 2006 coup in Fiji. While it is unlikely that the RFMF will accede to all the recommendations, especially the one that the Commander of the RFMF should relinquish political power, the recommendations are generally moderate. The demands place legitimate pressure on the Interim Government to act properly, especially in terms of the mistreatment of citizens as has happened at Queen Elizabeth Barracks. The insistence of a return to barracks for all the military may not be in the best interests of the country, and it is to be noted that Suva and possibly Nadi have been made safer by the presence of checkpoints.

My main objection to the report has been that the EPG failed to capture the level of support for the Interim Government found among Fijians, both indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians. In this respect n. 33, which states that support for the Interim Government lies with Indo-Fijians and support for the ousted Government with indigenous Fijians, is clearly in error.

The main weakness of the Report lies in its sources, which are oligarchic rather than democratic. These, in turn, were determined by the Terms of Reference given to the EPG, which specify whom the EPG should meet. There is no suggestion that they should seek to establish the views of the wider population, nor is there any indication in the Report that they attempted to do so.

A second weakness is that Report is somewhat restricted in its scope, though this may be a function of the pressure of the moment. N. 14, for instance, recognises that there is a long history of which this coup is part, but does not attempt to draw any lessons from that history. At a different level, the tenor of the report, as specified by the Terms of Reference, is to propose a way of return to democratic government rather than more broadly to ask what would be best for Fiji at the present time and even to raise a number of possible ways of achieving this good, including constitutional change.

Despite these weaknesses, the EPG has offered a way forward. It has clarified the main goals of the Interim Government, namely electoral reform and the establishment of a corruption commission. It has put pressure on the Interim Government firstly to respect the rights of citizens and secondly to enable a reasonably quick though not hasty return to elected government. If these recommendations can be accommodated, it has encouraged the Forum to assist the Interim Government in achieving its goals.

My own observations in Fiji in the week before the visit of the EPG was that the Interim Government with its military backing had done much to improve the situation in Fiji and that this was recognised by a majority of Fijians. Although there remains a question of how much they can possibly achieve in the long term, their initial success needs to be recognised. On the other hand, military rule, which has the gun as its source of power, should necessarily be limited in time, because eventually it will have to use lethal force, if there is not a full return to normal policing, to a properly functioning judiciary and to the opportunity for citizens to make their objections to the actions government known.

Any full understanding of the current situation in Fiji has to take into account the ethnic diversity of the country, the traditional forms of rule among indigenous Fijians, issues arising from Fiji’s geography and its history. Of significance historically are the reasons for cession to Britain in 1874, government under Britain and the process leading to independence in 1970, and the series of coups and unorthodox changes of government beginning not in 1987 but in 1977. Fiji can be seen to be wrestling with how to reconcile a traditional family or tribal-based society with modern political forms. Its efforts have been severely complicated by the presence of the large population of Indo-Fijians who were brought to Fiji originally as indentured labourers but who are now Fijians.

Fiji is being pressed towards modern democracy in ways not experienced by other Pacific countries by the presence of the Indo-Fijians, because it needs a political form that can accommodate such significant differences of culture and political expectation. Such change is also likely to advantage indigenous Fijians of ability and education who are not part of the chiefly system. The underlying questions are of justice and of how it can be achieved for all Fijians. If it is to be achieved, the primary institutions of justice, namely the Parliament and the Courts, have to serve the well being of all Fijians. This has radical implications for whether traditional forms of indigenous rule can be easily accommodated, and there is good reason to believe that this is what the current coup is about.
It is not helpful, therefore, to react to the current situation in Fiji as if it were the illegal action of a group of malcontents overthrowing a legitimate government in a stable situation, as did Australia and New Zealand in their initial reactions. Rather, Fiji should be seen to be in a long-term state of political development. One might use the term, ‘evolution’, rather than the preferred ancient term, ‘revolution’. While Fiji is in the midst of that evolution, different parts of the population will necessarily act to push for what they see as a better solution to the tensions that are part of the country in its current state of development. That some moments of this evolution have been rather nasty is regrettable, but not beyond expectation. What the rest of the world can do is support Fiji in its evolution, both by direct support of its efforts and by pressing for moderation when the processes become too disruptive. To some extent the EPG has recognised this.

[The terms of reference of the EPG and other documents are available on the Pacific Forum Site: www.forumsec.org.fj]

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