

A photograph of a group of men sitting on the grass in front of a thatched-roof building in a tropical setting. The men are dressed in casual clothing, and one man in the center is raising his hand. The background shows palm trees and a thatched-roof building. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter.

Fiji in the Summer of 2009:
*Impressions of Society and
the Post-Coup Regime*

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Foreword

Before I discuss my impressions of life as I saw it in Fiji, let me start by explaining the circumstances that led me to this island nation in the first place. The exact chain of events is a little too complicated to explain in its entirety— it involves the US Navy, the swine flu and a ten-day trip I took to Kaua'i. But starting from the beginning and eliminating the superfluous details, I'm a Master's degree student at the University of Virginia's Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy. As part of the program, students conduct a ten-week, policy-related internship the summer between their first and second years. I decided to spend my summer living and working in a developing country because of my interest in the field of international development, which I discovered while working on a water filtration project in Cameroon as an undergraduate engineering student. So, when I found an opportunity to work in Fiji for six weeks, off I went. I was also offered an internship for the last four weeks of summer with the Pacific Islands Development Program at the East West Center in Honolulu, which among other things conducts policy research in the region. So, I spent my time in Fiji studying the political situation, researching the effects of the post-coup government. I lived with a family in Lautoka, volunteered at an orphanage in Nadi and traveled around a good bit too, meeting as many Fiji Islanders as I could, asking about the current state of affairs and their opinions about elections, money and the interim prime minister. I also spent one week in the remote village of Litivia, where the adults were welcoming, generous and talkative and the children were as well behaved and adorable as you could imagine.

I went to Litivia with another volunteer I had met in Lautoka, and we spent our days helping out in the village primary school. Mostly, I told kids all about America and Jill told them all about Australia, but we also learned Fiji's national anthem and showed them how to do the Hokie Pokie. We taught Forms 1 and 2 (which share a classroom) where to find our countries on a map and what animals you might see if you visited. We taught Forms 3 and 4 how the countries were discovered and colonized and when they gained independence. With Forms 5 and 6 we discussed how the governments work and the names of the U.S. President and the Australian Prime Minister.

We taught all six classes the capital cities. When we quizzed them about it, we were proud to find they all knew that Canberra is the capital of Australia and Washington, D.C. is the capital of the States. As we were getting on the bus to leave the village a few days later, Jill asked if anyone could remember Australia's capital. They looked at each other and then shouted in unison, "Sydney!" She had thoroughly explained to all 40 of them why, in fact, Sydney had not been named the capital of Australia and why the government had to create a whole new city instead. I realize these kids didn't have to hear the story three times, like I did, but they still should have gotten that one. So I laughed at her, smiled and then turned to the kids. I asked them, with a great deal of confidence, what the capital of the U.S. was and looked back at Jill, ready to gloat. Again in total unison, they shouted, "New York!" She laughed at me the whole way down the

aisle and into our seats. As we sat down, though, I consoled myself: "At least they didn't say Hollywood."

Now at the East West Center, nearing the end of my summer, I have attempted to compile my thoughts on what I observed during my visit to Fiji – what I saw, what I heard and whether or not I think the country has cause to worry. Before I begin, however, here are a few things to know about the pages that follow.

I earned my Bachelor's degree in Systems Engineering just two-and-a-half months ago, so the principles of simple, random sampling and statistical significance are still very fresh in my mind. As such, I feel the need to explain how I derived the conclusions presented in this paper. I did not conduct a statistical survey 1) because I didn't have the resources and 2) because I didn't want to be deported. I write here about conversations I had as I went about my day – conversations with my host family, employees at the orphanage, friends I met around town, people I spent my evenings playing in squash and tour guides who took me whitewater rafting on the Upper Navua or mountain biking in the Nasori Highlands. I asked people questions as we hiked around the village together or when they sat down next to me on the bus ride home. I visited only three of the islands, two rural villages, one city and a number of small towns. I spent the vast majority of my time in Lautoka, which itself is home to less than five percent of all Fiji Islanders, even though it's the nation's second largest municipality. I cannot provide confidence intervals for any of my assertions, but I met lots of people, asked lots of questions and listened intently to all the answers. Likewise, this was not a Gallup Poll and I do not claim that anything I assert is representative of the entire population. These are just my impressions after six weeks of making friends, volunteering, getting to know people, drinking kava and, of course, talking politics, which fortunately for me, Fijians love to do.

When you pull out a camera in the middle of a remote village whose people rarely interact with *kai va lani* (literally, Europeans, or white tourists) all the kids stop what they're doing, huddle together, smile and make a peace sign. It's impossible to capture them candidly unless you're as stealthy as a shadow in the dead of night. Likewise, when you pull out your Moleskine and start taking notes in the middle of a casual conversation with a friend at a bar, he looks at you funny and changes his tone. (Fijians don't get deported. Nowadays, they get locked up). And so, the conversations I recount here were recorded after they took place. I listened meticulously, trying to remember them word-for-word, but most of the quotations accurately represent the overall meaning of the statement and not always, in fact, rarely, the exact and original wording.



Students in Litivia who were in the middle of the Hokie Pokie when they saw my camera turn on

During these conversations, there was also rarely the occasion to include the question, “Would you mind providing written permission for me to publish your comments when I return to the States?” Therefore, having not obtained permission, I have changed the names of all the people with whom I spoke and almost all the places that I traveled, though there are two exceptions. The island chain I visited really is called the Yasawas and Lautoka really is called Lautoka.

Lastly, while English is Fiji’s official language, more than half of the population learned only Fijian until school and another forty percent first learned Hindi. I, however, know neither Fijian nor Hindi and while a number of Fijians are quite fluent in English, most speak a dialect that both locals and outsiders acknowledge would be more aptly referred to as *FijEnglish* and in many ways is particularly different from proper English itself. This means that as we conversed in “English,” there very well may have been misunderstandings that no one caught on to at the time and which I’m still unaware of now as I recount our discussion. Obviously, I don’t think this was the case, but it’s a consideration worth making nonetheless.

FijEnglish was far more than an obstacle to conversation. In addition to being a charming and unexpected aspect of the culture, it also added a number of useful words to my vocabulary. My favorite FijEnglish word, by far, is tubelight. (My favorite Fijian saying is lakotani matalassa, which means “go away, funny face” and which I think is just as funny as whoever’s face it’s referring to. But my favorite FijEnglish saying is tubelight.) Almost every light bulb in Fiji is fluorescent, and most are the long, skinny, tubular kind that Americans usually find in the ceilings of gymnasiums or school classrooms. The Fijians call them tubelights and as any one of them will tell you, a distinct characteristic of the tubelight is that it takes a few seconds to fully turn on once you’ve flipped the switch. Well, one day I was sitting around the living room with a few of my host siblings as they tried to explain to me the rules of field hockey. Though nowhere near as popular as rugby, field hockey is a pretty big sport in the secondary schools and one I’ve only seen played once or twice. They were trying to explain to me how the high-stick penalty works, and slow to catch on, I finally exclaimed after about six minutes of them looking at me like I was losing it, “Oh! You mean the stick isn’t allowed to go above your waist!” They all started to laugh, and after she caught her breath, Adi said with much more love than it sounds like here, “Oh, Kelly. You’re such a tubelight.”

Life in Fiji

Fiji is by no means a thriving democracy. Its leadership has been usurped, its constitution abrogated and elections pushed back another five years. But while international scholars the world over warn of a rapidly deteriorating, failed state, the view from inside Fiji as I observed it does little to substantiate their fears. Though the attitude of the interim prime minister, himself, does leave reason to worry, the state of the local economy, the tourism industry, the effects of military rule and the general public sentiment all point to a country surviving the dictatorship of an unelected government better than anyone could have expected. Such resilience and optimism are hard to believe, but this is what I found.

The Economy and Devaluation

In April of this year, interim Prime Minister Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama announced that the Reserve Bank planned to devalue Fiji's dollar by about 20% – the amount which it claimed the dollar had appreciated since 2007.¹ The interim Prime Minister stated that this move would “cushion the effects of the global financial crisis,”² increasing exports and attracting international investors and tourists. Since April, the devaluation has led to increased inflation and diminished purchasing power for the Fijian people.

Economists have long debated the necessity for such action. Fijian economist, Doctor Chandra Dulare, argued that devaluation was avoidable, as the local economy had begun to fall due to factors like the “Value Added Tax of a few years ago and the recent increase in import duties”³ and *not* as a result of market forces. Former Prime Minister (1999 to 2000) and former interim Finance Minister under Bainimarama and current leader of the Fiji Labour Party, Mahendra Chaudhry, voiced his opposition to devaluation as well. He said it would cause more problems than it would solve as it “undermines confidence in the local economy (and) deters investment.”⁴ He also noted that this will substantially increase Fiji's debt-service charges as many of her loans are held in foreign currency.

On the other hand Professor Satish Chand, associate professor of International and Development Economics at the Australian National University, claimed that because the Fiji dollar was so overvalued, a devaluation was required to balance the country's economy and the longer Fiji waited to do so, the more painful it would be.

¹ "Fiji Dollar Devalued 20% by Interim Govt." *TVNZ*. 15 Apr. 2009. Web. 12 Aug. 2009. <<http://tvnz.co.nz/business-news/fiji-dollar-devalued-20-interim-govt-2646868>>

² Johnson, Ed. "Australia Backs EU's Firm Line Canceling Sugar Aid to Fiji." *Bloomberg*. 20 May 2009. Web. 14 Aug. 2009.

³ "'No Need' for Devaluation." *FijiTimes Online*. The Fiji Times, 22 Aug. 2007. Web. 30 July 2009. <<http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=69005>>

⁴ "Chaudhry: Devaluation Causes More Woes." *Solomon Star*. 16 Apr. 2009. Web. 2 Aug. 2009. <http://solomonstarnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=8345&change=71&changeo wn=79&Itemid=26>

The power to devalue the dollar is held solely by the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF). Because the RBF is an entity operating independently of the cabinet, a democratically elected government would not have been able to force their hand in the matter. But when the military took over and presumably ordered it done, the Reserve Bank was without the power to refuse.

So years into the debate, under the military's control, devaluation was finally announced. Despite the longstanding debate on the issue, the one thing all economists agreed on was the toll it would take on Fiji's people. Professor Chand said after the announcement that "workers, those dependent on their savings, the retired, and the destitute [so, basically everyone] will face the full brunt of the devaluation."⁵ Mr. Chaudhry reported that the government's decision will increase the hardship for ordinary people.⁶ The price of fuel, imported foods and consumer goods have and may continue to rise significantly in addition to locally produced goods and services. He added, "the gains from devaluation, as claimed by the RBF, pale into insignificance in comparison to the devastating effects it will have on our economy and the lives of the vast majority of our people who will have to struggle harder to put food on the table and provide for other basic necessities of their families."⁷

One would expect that by my arrival in July, the eye of the storm would have hit and across the country, citizens would be suffering from weakened purchasing power and lost incomes. On the whole, however, while villages and towns were experiencing consequences of the downturn, none were as severe as I would have anticipated. Granted I didn't visit every village and the worsening economy has surely affected certain areas quite differently than others, but the truth of the matter is that yes, delicacies were often less common, but basic needs were generally still met.

For example, women in the village of Mereoni expressed frustration with their recent inability to buy a variety of foods at the market. They earn less for the products they sell and have less to buy others in return. "I get so tired of *rourou* (the leaves of the taro plant, which when boiled most closely resemble spinach.) It's a staple here, but we used to buy other things like curry, chicken and bread. Now we eat *rourou* everyday because we grow it in our farms and we can't afford to buy other things from the market."

On the other hand, my first night in Litivia village, I could tell the situation there was a little rosier. We definitely had our *rourou* (lots and lots of *rourou*), but as we sat cross-legged on the pandanus-leaf floor mat passing around dish after dish, we also had our choice of packaged noodles, taro, fresh-caught fish, prawn, yams and many more foods I didn't have the stomach space to become acquainted with. After dinner, we had tea and coffee with cookies, bread, butter and jam. There wasn't just an incredible spread; there was a surprising abundance as well. At least ten people enjoyed the feast with us and there were plenty of leftovers when we were all done. Despite the ban (or *tabu*) on drinking kava for the month, there was plenty of that to go around as well.

⁵ "Economist: Devaluation is Long Overdue." *FijiLive*. 15 Apr. 2009. Web. 2 Aug. 2009. <<http://www.fijilive.com/news/2009/04/15/15234.Fijilive>>

⁶ "Chaudhry: Devaluation Causes More Woes." *Solomon Star*. 16 Apr. 2009. Web. 2 Aug. 2009. <http://solomonstarnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=8345&change=71&changeonwn=79&Itemid=26>

⁷ *Ibid.*

In addition to having money for food, Litivia also expects to raise funds for repairs to their water system within the next year. The government will be paying 90% of the cost assuming the villagers can collectively pay the other 10%. A friend said that it will take the whole year for each family to raise the money, but I was surprised to learn that they do earn enough capital selling their goods and crops, unlike Mereoni, to afford the system's upgrade, even if it will take twelve months of saving.

In the cities, the story shows just as much contrast. Urbanization appears to be slowing down as the cost of living continues to rise. In many cases, lifestyles haven't changed much at all. At the same time, Sereana, my host mom, told me she's noticed that a handful of city-dwellers have returned to their villages and squatter settlements continue to grow. If ever a native Fijian is forced, economically, out of his home, he can move back to his father's village, live off the land and farm all the food he needs. Therefore, as Wais, my host dad and Sereana's husband, explained it, the only way a native Fijian will go hungry is if he's lazy. While this system of subsistence living has been criticized as an obstacle to modern development, it has proven to be a mode of survival when the cash economy is in decline, as with today's global financial crisis.

Unfortunately, however, the current land laws dictate that this option is reserved for indigenous Fiji Islanders only as non-indigenous Fiji Islanders don't have villages to return to. Furthermore, it isn't just a matter of not being lazy, regardless of how productive or diligent Indo-Fijians are, for example, their livelihoods rely most often on securing the lease to farmland owned by a local village, as is the case with sugarcane farmers. So for these non-landowning citizens, their reaction and adaptation to the international financial crisis will be quite different, and the first manifestation of this may be the squatter settlements Sereana referred to.

For those who can afford to remain in the city, I heard both adults and teenagers mention the rising prices, as inflation has spread to include not just long-loaf hot bread, tea and chicken but pre-paid cell phones, movie tickets and cigarettes, too. But despite negative shifts in economic indicators, there is not yet reason for despair. The diet in Mereoni may lack variety but the villagers certainly aren't going hungry. Some people may be moving back to villages or to shanty towns, but the majority of both indigenous and Indo-Fijian families have been able to remain in their homes. Prices may be rising to uncomfortable levels, but bread, chicken and cigarettes are still being consumed quite steadily.

The Economy and Tourism

The tourism industry provides another reason for optimism despite unclear prospects. In recent years, tourism has become Fiji's top-earning industry. Though it sounds like reason to celebrate, this improvement in standing is due mostly to the diminishing profitability of the once-dominant sugar industry rather than an increased number of visitors to the islands. As I mentioned earlier, Bainimarama asserted that devaluing Fiji's dollar last April would attract foreign travelers and boost the tourism industry, which is the principle source of employment providing cash income for the indigenous population. (The sugar industry and retail stores are the main sources of income for Indo-Fijians, in particular.) Just four months after the

devaluation, it is hard to say what the immediate results have been for tourism, but I can say that even if the industry isn't growing like a forest of Fijian bamboo, it certainly isn't dying either.

My last week in Fiji, I traveled on the Yasawa Flyer ferry which runs from Nadi's Port Denarau all the way out to the end of the Yasawa island chain. Each of the three times I hopped on the ferry, it was packed with tourists – honeymooners from California, surfers from Australia and around-the-world backpackers from England stopping at a few islands before their flight to Los Angeles. These travelers were doing more than just riding the ferry; they were also spending their money at the port, buying souvenirs from Jack's of Fiji and dining at the Hard Rock Café.

The tourism-driven village of Tavusei is known for their inexpensive, freshwater pearls, so it's a must for many shopping tourists. Visitors are also treated to a guided walk around the village, meeting locals, photographing the



Saleseini selling her jewelry at the Tavusei market

village, meeting locals, photographing the church and hearing about the British missionary, Thomas Baker, who landed in 1867, offended the chief and was eaten for dinner. (Apparently, they even cooked his boots, which are now on display in a museum in Suva.) I was surprised to find that in this one small village, there was no shortage of visitors. From the US, Australia and Europe, there were families, couples and backpackers, all buying souvenirs from the five-table handicraft market that is the Tavusei welcome center.

While I saw travelers almost everywhere I went, I also noticed that accommodations were rarely full. On three occasions, my friends and I were told there wouldn't be room for us, but room was always found. In fact, there were so many times when I was accommodated immediately after being told there were no seats on the bus, rooms in the hostel or spaces on the ferry that I honestly thought playing hard to get was the Fijian way of doing business.

In reality, I think the industry, perhaps in response to the government's promises, was expecting greater numbers from this year's peak season and had yet to adjust to the slightly bleaker conditions. Bainimarama claimed that the sudden and disappointing decrease in tourism felt in the years following the coup were caused by reckless, unfair reporting by the media in countries like Australia who supposedly portrayed the situation as violent and dangerous for visitors. Whether the reporting was reckless and unfair or whether Bainimarama may himself be to blame for orchestrating the coup in the first place, tourism did fall in the year that followed and citing the devaluation in particular, the Commodore promised a return to prosperity that doesn't seem to have happened quite as he hoped.

While prospects for the industry remain uncertain, I don't think the outlook is grim. Fiji was recently rated the 7th best spot for a honeymoon and it's no wonder why. Even more promising, I think, is the up-and-coming star of the industry, its new market for VolunTourism.

Kids on a gap year, college students on summer break and adults in between careers are all flying to Fiji to save the world one island at a time while they enjoy the scenery and experience the culture. A voluntourist myself, I met dozens of people who had left home for a few months to live and volunteer in the developing world.

Because a voluntourist obtains the same visa as any other tourist, Fiji has no way of knowing how significant VolunTourism is becoming for the greater industry, but as EcoTourism blossomed in the 90's, so VolunTourism is becoming ever-popular throughout the world. With the help of a few well-established organizations, Fiji will continue to draw voluntourists with her exotic landscape, her knowledge of English and her amazingly friendly people.

Society and Public Opinion

In addition to the numbers and economic statistics, the effect of this government on *society* as a whole is not only an important consideration but one that particularly struck me during my visit. Public opinion is as varied as Fiji's terrain and across generations and locations, people are altogether undecided about the current political situation.

Sitting around the living room one night, I started chatting with Inoke, my 17-year-old host sister, about the speech Frank had given earlier that day in Suva. Commander Frank addressed the nation to explain his plan for restoring democracy in 2014 and what he'll be doing in the meantime – working to improve the economy, building necessary infrastructure and rewriting the constitution to remove racially biased voting procedures. Inoke said she just didn't see why it would take so long. "I think he just wants power. Five years to rewrite a constitution? It's already been three. I think he just wants to be prime minister for a while."

Talking with Wais, Inoke's father, one morning as he drove me to work, I found that he, unlike his daughter, was willing to give Frank the benefit of the doubt. But he still wasn't a staunch supporter. He wasn't exactly excited about waiting until 2014 – he told me the country is ready to vote, ready to have a legitimate government again, and ready to stop being kicked out of one international organization after another, like the Commonwealth and the Pacific Islands Forum. But he understands that rewriting a nation's constitution can take some time. "Frank wants to stop the race-based voting. And he's right about that. We shouldn't vote again until race is taken out of it, but it's going to take a while. He needs to do a census of the entire population. We're a small country, but a census still isn't easy. So for now...I understand."

Some people are frustrated, some are sympathetic, some couldn't be more supportive. And that's where Leveni comes in. Leveni and I were riding together in the back of a van on our way to Nadi one Thursday night with some mutual friends. We had just been introduced, so I was excited to have a new Fijian friend to discuss politics with, but I didn't want to scare him off with an overzealous verbal questionnaire. So, we just chatted for the first 20 minutes of this 30-minute ride and got to know each other. (This was made difficult because of the blaring American R&B music filling the van, but we managed). I hadn't decided yet if I was going to ask him any of my questions about Fijian politics; I figured maybe I could wait at least until the van ride home. In the middle of the chit-chat, though, it dawned on me that Leveni had just referred to the prime minister as "Uncle Frank." I asked him about this and he said, "Yeah, Frank's my uncle." Frank is actually something like the cousin of Leveni's uncle, but in Fiji, where family

trees are a little blurry, that makes him Leveni's uncle. And anyway, the point is they're blood-related, their families are close and Leveni knows Frank quite well. As I tried to wipe the star-struck look off my face, the questions were lining up en masse in my mind but I decided to start with the basics. I asked him as unassumingly as I knew how, "So being Frank's nephew and all, what's your take on this whole coup thing?"

Leveni just stared at me. It seemed like everyone in the van had turned to stare at me. Up until that point, they had all been rocking out to the Black Eyed Peas, who as far as I could tell, might as well have shown up too, just to abruptly halt their pop ballad and gawk along with everyone else. After a few seconds, Leveni finally responded squarely, "I don't call it a coup."

With everyone still staring, I took a second to think about this. Have I met anyone here who has called it anything *other* than a coup? I feel pretty confident it's widely accepted within the country and the international community that this was, in fact, a coup-d'état. The leader of the military marched into the government building, removed the prime minister, appointed himself in the interim and took over the leadership of the country. Sounds like a coup to me, but Leveni looks like a reasonable guy, so I say as politely as I can, "Oh, well what do you call it instead?"

"I call it fixing the government."

Granted I didn't spend much time hanging around the Bainimarama family, but Leveni was the only Fijian I spoke with who felt this way, who didn't even recognize the events of December 5, 2006 as a political coup, and who whole-heartedly believed that Frank was thinking of nothing more than "fixing the government."

There weren't too many people in Inoke's camp, either. While there were a few who voiced minor frustrations with the state of the government, there was no hostility, no anger, just confusion, maybe. Confusion as to why it would take so long, why his explanations do little to answer their questions, why he appears to be working harder to maintain power than to improve living conditions or to restore the constitution.

“ I don't call it a coup... I call it fixing the government. ”

The vast majority of people I met thought like Wais – they were ready to vote, ready to be a democracy but patiently waiting for the polls to open. Friends I met in Lautoka, women I worked with in Nadi, people who staffed the backpacker resorts and villagers in Litivia all said similar things. They followed politics closely, they knew what was happening and they were waiting for Bainimarama to come through on his promises. Patience and understanding seem to abound in Fiji, so it's really no surprise they manifest themselves here as well.

Society and Military Rule

When the leader of the military becomes the leader of the government, everyone gets a little nervous. (This is particularly true in a country like Fiji where members of the military are the only ones allowed to own or carry firearms.) We've seen this kind of thing before. A military

official topples a democratically elected leader, accusing the latter of rampant corruption. Initially, the military official plans to serve only as a caretaker until free elections can be held. Vying to remain relevant and powerful, however, he appoints himself the official leader and slowly adopts corrupt practices of his own until he has become a full-fledged dictator. There's no doubt that people in Fiji are concerned that this may, too, be the fate of Bainimarama's military junta, but when I met Frank at a bar one night, it made me question their fears.

It's my last Friday in Fiji and my host family invites my friends and me to a party at their club. It's a big shindig – the food and drinks are on the house and there are probably more than 150 people mingling around. Partway through the night, Sereana, my host mom, who knows how interested I am in Fijian politics, walks my way to tell me that the PM has just arrived at the party. I jump out of my seat and start looking around. I've seen a number of pictures of Frank and watched him give a speech, so I feel like I should be able to recognize him, even at a party this big, but I can't even find a single guy in a military uniform. I remember that he was wearing a sulu (a rectangular piece of fabric similar to a sarong wrapped around one's waist like a skirt as formal attire) the day of the speech so I scan the crowd again, but still nothing. Finally, I ask Sereana and once she stops laughing at me, she tells me he's not wearing either. She points to a man in a Bula shirt and khaki pants drinking a Fiji Bitter beer.

His company looks just as casual as he does, save for one young man who's wearing a sulu and happens to be the largest Fijian I've ever seen. Apparently he's Frank's bodyguard, but his main job seems to be refilling Frank's beer.

I'm introduced to Mr. Bainimarama and he's kind enough to pose for a picture. I tell him I'm from the U.S., that I'm volunteering here for six weeks and that I have absolutely loved Fiji so far. Obviously, I would have really liked to ask him questions about the government and his plans for restoring democracy, but he has a pretty long way to go in his tray of Fiji Bitters and I don't want to kill his buzz. I also don't want to be deported, so I step aside and let my British friends say hello as well.

We get out of his hair and leave him to his friends after about five minutes of polite chatting. We make our way to the dance floor where we boogy for quite a while, but the other twenty-somethings and I have to call it a night around two in the morning. Frank, however, enjoys the open bar until well after four.

Meeting Frank was surprisingly surreal. It wasn't scary. It didn't feel oppressive. He was just a guy at a party with his friends (and his servant bodyguard). There may be another side to Frank that I missed that night, the one I had *expected* to see – the side of him that stormed into the government buildings and commandeered the reigns of the national



A volunteer friend and I pose with Mr Bainimarama

government, that has arrested and intimidated political opponents and has threatened to shut down dissenting media entities. But what I saw was not what I had expected at all.

Looking back now, Frank may have been just another guy at a party, but he's still a military dictator and one aspect of his military government that particularly worries Fiji Islanders and the international community alike is the extent to which Bainimarama will use military force to maintain his position. He's already taken over the government, dismissed the judiciary, and abrogated the constitution. The fear is that this abuse of power will continue to manifest itself, perhaps even more forcefully, in a number of ways, including the military's treatment of political opponents, their control of security in the streets, and their determination to censor the media.

Military Detainments

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) wrote a letter to the interim Prime Minister and to President Ratu Josefa Iloilo in February of 2007 which clearly articulates their concern for the regime's continued abuses of civilians' human rights, citing numerous occasions where individuals have been arbitrarily detained.

"On the evening of December 24, 2006, Ms. Virisila Buadromo, executive director of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, Mr. Arshad Daud, Ms. Buadromo's partner, Ms. Laisa Digitaki, a businesswoman, Mr. Imraz Iqbal, a businessman and former journalist, and Ms. Jacqueline Koroi and Mr. Pita Waqavonovono, both youth activists, were taken from their homes by members of the military. No arrest warrants were produced. Between the coup on December 5, 2006 and this incident, some members of this group had received threatening phone calls from individuals who identified themselves as members of the military. The six were taken to the Queen Elizabeth Barracks, where they were questioned and beaten by military officials. At least two were hit in the face in the course of their questioning, and one required a neck brace following her release. Another suffered a broken leg and broken ribs. Early the following morning, they were forced to run 10km in the rain to Lami, where they were made to dismantle pro-democracy banners. They were subsequently informed by the Immigration Department that they would not be allowed to leave the country."⁸

Human Rights Watch notes that in response to questions about this practice, Bainimarama seemingly endorsed the behavior saying, "If we need to call [activists] in and say you're speaking too much, we'll do it."⁹ While the law provides that criminal suspects can be legally held for up to 48 hours, none of these six were ever accused of any criminal activity, but

⁸ Adams, Brad. "Letter to Interim Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama and President Ratu Josefa Iloilo of Fiji." *Human Rights Watch*. 4 Feb. 2007. Web. 10 Aug. 2009.

⁹ Ibid.

were detained without due cause. Furthermore, Brad Adams, Executive Director of HRW's Asia Division, states that Fiji's constitution, which had yet to be abrogated by the time of the letter's publication, "guarantees the fundamental rights of expression (section 30), assembly (section 31), and association (section 32). (The government's actions) appear to also violate the rights to be treated 'with humanity and respect for his or her dignity' if arrested and detained (section 27 (1)(e))." Additionally, Adams points to the death in military custody of Mr. Nakelo Verebasaga, a land surveyor, as even greater evidence of serious disregard for human rights.

By the time HRW wrote a second letter to the president in May of 2009, the situation had significantly deteriorated. As of 2008, Fiji can be found on Genocide Watch's list of current threats and according to the Public Emergency Regulations 2009, decreed on April 1, "suspects can be legally subject to detention for up to seven days without charge." Furthermore, Regulation 3(3) provides that [n]o police officer, member of the Armed Forces, nor any person acting in aid of either shall be liable in criminal or civil proceedings for having by the use of such force caused harm or death to any person. Ignoring the rights of citizens and providing immunity for the officers who abuse them has been internationally condemned but remains common practice for the military government."¹⁰ Adams concludes both letters by warning that the future of human rights in Fiji remains in jeopardy should the government fail to correct these behaviors.

Wais was driving me to work one morning well before I'd ever heard of any of these reports and I was, as usual, asking all kinds of questions, this time about what's been going on in the media. He told me that foreign journalists had been deported and that bloggers were now writing anonymously for fear of being arrested. Then he said, "I was taken to the army camp once."

"What?? What do you mean you were taken to the army camp? What happened?"

"Mmm (which was Wais's way of saying "uh-huh"). Soldiers came to our house and asked me to go with them down to the army camp." (The confusingly light-hearted tone Wais used here almost made me think they had invited him for afternoon tea.)

"What?? And you just went voluntarily? Why did they want *you*?"

"I used to write letters to the paper and Frank gave a speech back on Dec..em...ber....a few days after the coup and referenced a section of the constitution which doesn't even exist. He said this section justified what he'd done but he quoted it wrong.* So I wrote a letter. And after some more letters, they came and asked me to stop writing."

"What?? What'd you say to them?"

"I told them I was just telling the truth. Frank quoted the constitution wrong and I was just telling people about it. And I told them I wasn't going to stop writing just because they had asked me to."

¹⁰ Adams, Brad. "Letter to Interim Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama and President Ratu Josefa Iloilo of Fiji." *Human Rights Watch*. 4 Feb. 2007. Web. 10 Aug. 2009.

* Apparently, Bainimarama asserted that Section 101 (1) gave him the right to dismiss the Prime Minister. According to Wais, Section 101 (1) does not exist and Section 101 reads: "Oath of office by Minister. Before taking office, a Minister must make, before the President, the Oath of Allegiance and the oath of office set out in Part C of the Schedule."

“What?? You said that to them?”

“Mmm. Then my mother found out and she called to tell me that I had to stop writing, that it wasn’t worth it. And whatever your mother says is what you do in Fiji. So I don’t write anymore.”

I told Wais I thought he was being surprisingly nonchalant about this. “When stuff like that happens in movies, Wais, people don’t ever come back. Weren’t you scared?”

“No. I wasn’t scared. I hadn’t done anything wrong.”

I didn’t bother to tell him that in *The Last King of Scotland* (which is my only mental picture of what happens when a military like that takes someone from their home) they hadn’t always done anything wrong either, but they were still killed. Wais had a faith in *justice* that I wasn’t expecting to find in someone living under an illegal government that adamantly refused to cede power or hold democratic elections. But on the other hand, maybe his faith here was reasonable. Soldiers did come and take him from his home, but they also returned him in one piece later the same day. And I hadn’t, until much later, heard stories of others being taken and treated any worse. At the time, it sounded to me like maybe *justice* did still have a place in this unelected, military government. Yes, the government was getting a little anxious and was fighting to suppress the growing civilian opposition, but from what I understood at the time, at least they hadn’t abused anyone’s human rights.

Then, of course, I learned about the Human Rights Watch and Genocide Watch reports

“No. I wasn’t scared.
I hadn’t done
anything wrong.”

as well as independent, documented accusations and I figured Wais’s sentiments about justice just went out the window, except that he knew about violent and illegal detainment before he even expressed them. It may be hard to imagine and Wais may be too trusting and understanding for his own good, but he sure seems to think there’s still reason to

believe in justice even when an unelected military dictator is abusing human rights.

Security in the Streets

Impressions of a “military dictatorship” might lead us to believe that soldiers roam the streets, inciting fear in every civilian. That was certainly what I thought initially, based on reports I had read about the regime. So, when I learned that I had arrived in Suva too late in the day to tour Parliament, I still could have wandered around the city instead, but I hopped from one Pacific Transport bus right on to another and transferred my way out of there. This was partly because I am a girl traveling alone and a city, post-coup or not, can be a dangerous place. Mostly, though, I was afraid a *kai va lani* girl walking around the streets with a big rucksack on her back would stand out and alarm the dozens of soldiers I assumed would be posted at every other corner.

I later discovered that while the first half of my hesitation was probably wisely prudent, the second half was largely unfounded. Soldiers do not roam the streets with AK-47s. (In fact, I saw more AK-47s in my 10-day trip to democratically ruled Cameroon than I did during my six weeks in Fiji.) And more importantly, neither soldiers nor anyone else are going around inciting fear in the public. When a number of different people in Lautoka recounted to me the reasons they had each moved up from Suva within the last few years, they told me it rained too much for their liking, the city was too big and unfriendly, it was no place to raise their children or they had moved to be with family. Not one person who had lived in Suva during the coup or in the three years after cited military behaviors as a reason for feeling uncomfortable in the city or for moving elsewhere.

Furthermore, while the Fiji police force has again taken charge of protecting the streets, there was a period of about three months after the coup when the military assumed their role. Even with all the anticipation and anxiety that immediately follows a coup-d'état like this one, all I heard about those few months was how much safer the streets were than they had been before or have been since.

I went mountain biking with some friends one day in the Nausori Highlands just inland from Nadi. Mark, the owner of the bike company, picked us up in Nadi town and drove us up into the mountains to his shop where he fitted us for our bikes before he took us on our tour. Mark was born in Switzerland, grew up for a while in France (he sounded as French as they come), moved to California, then to Australia, then to a few other countries he rattled off too quickly for me to remember and even lived in my hometown in Florida for a while to get his PADI license. He's lived in Fiji for about 7 years now, he says. So, Mark's been around the block a time or two. Even though my friends are quite sick of hearing me ask people about politics by now, I'm sitting in the passenger seat. Usually this just means I get to control the radio station, but this time I take it to mean that I get to control the conversation, too.

This wasn't long after Wais told me about his afternoon at camp, so I ask Mark what it's been like having the military control the country and if he's ever seen anything like it before. He proceeds to tell me, in his very French accent, how unsafe he felt when he first moved to Fiji. As we drive down King Street right through Nadi, he takes a minute to tell me that this area is particularly bad and I should never walk around by myself, even during the day. I reach over and lock my car door, thank him for the tip and ask him more about his feeling unsafe.

"There was just so much crime. So much stealing, violence. But after the coup, no more. There was no more rape, no more theft, no more violence. The soldiers did a better job with the streets than the police do now."

"So you felt *safer* when the military was in the streets?" I ask for clarification.

"Ah, yes. It is much better for us to have soldiers in the streets, as you say, than the police. When the military had to go back to their camp, things got much worse."

Fiji's strict gun laws dictate that with a few exceptions, only the military can carry firearms^{11*} and they're not usually in the habit of waiving them about. So this leaves Fiji with a

¹¹ Fiji Islands. *Parliament of the Fiji Islands*. Arms and Ammunition Bill 2003. Web. 15 Aug. 2009. <<http://www.parliament.gov.fj/legislative/bills.aspx?billID=238&viewtype=summary&billnav=bill>>.

population of people who never see guns except in Hollywood movies, which of course means they're scared to death of them. As soon as you even say the word *gun*, most Fijians look at you like you're pointing one at them. So I figured they would have hated the military posting up on every corner. Even though a number of people did later recall feeling uneasy because of the gun presence, it didn't seem to affect how most people felt about the military patrolling their streets. Due to the tight-lipped, highly censored government, it's difficult to find accurate crime rates to corroborate his claim, but the general consensus lines up exactly with what Rob told me in the car that day. The military government may be obstructing the nation's right to hold free and fair elections, but apparently they were also protecting the people and if they instilled fear in anyone, it seems to have only included the criminals.

Censorship of the Media

Fijians have been slowly losing their right to free speech and the freedom of the press every day since Bainimarama took office. He's stated that he doesn't want to "go down the path of Zimbabwe,"¹² but his actions over the last three years would suggest otherwise. He's deported a number of international journalists without legitimate reason or warning. He has threatened bloggers to "shut down or else," a number of whom have heeded the threat. He has passed resolutions, like the Public Emergency Regulations 2009, that cast a wide net of illegality with which he can prosecute journalists or bloggers who are barely even critical of the government. "Any material the secretary believes may result in a breach of the peace, or promote disaffection or public alarm or undermine the government" is subject to restriction. Following the abrogation of the constitution on April 10, he placed Ministry of Information officers in newsrooms to supervise publications. Shortly thereafter, on April 12, "the most widely distributed national daily newspaper, the *Fiji Times*, contained blank spaces, with the notice, 'the stories on this page could not be published due to government restrictions' and Fiji TV cancelled its 6 p.m. news broadcast, displaying instead this message, 'Viewers please be advised that there will be no 6 p.m. news tonight.'"¹³

Because propaganda and censorship can be subtly deceiving, it is difficult to discern whether one has become a victim of either. So to say I felt like I wasn't being fed propaganda or shown only censored reports may in fact be to say that Bainimarama's government has

Johnson, Ed. "Australia Backs EU's Firm Line Canceling Sugar Aid to Fiji." *Bloomberg*. 20 May 2009. Web. 14 Aug. 2009.

*As per the Arms and Ammunition Act of 2003, a person must be one of the following to obtain a license to carry a gun: a member of a rifle club, a member of the military, the President, a crewmember on a vessel or aircraft, a licensed arms dealer, a public officer specifically exempted by the Minister or – my personal favorite – a member of a theatrical or circus company using the firearm in a theatrical production. In April 2003, a total of 1,465 civilians lawfully held a gun license, amounting to less than 0.2% of the population.

¹²Wilson, Ashleigh. "I'll Close Media: Fiji Dictator." *The Australian Business*. The Australian, 6 May 2008. Web. 13 Aug. 2009. <<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,23652185-7582,00.html>>

¹³Adams, Brad. "Letter to Interim Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama and President Ratu Josefa Iloilo of Fiji." *Human Rights Watch*. 4 Feb. 2007. Web. 10 Aug. 2009.

censored the media quite effectively indeed. Nonetheless, I don't feel like I was being fed propaganda or shown only censored media. On a local Fijian computer in my local Fijian home, the only thing I wasn't able to access were music videos on YouTube, which due to copyright laws, people in Great Britain can't even watch. I did, however, read articles from Sydney and Auckland and blogs from within Fiji, all of which heavily criticized the government. Still, the threats that Bainimarama has made to members of the media are deplorable and should be rescinded. The Fiji Media Council has expressed their disappointment with the regime's attack on the press. Censorship of the media "is a tragedy for a country where free and vigorous news reporting has become a proud tradition."¹⁴

Bainimarama's Appearance

After living in Fiji for six weeks, I'm optimistic about the future, as are most of the Fijians I met there. What worries me the most, however, is Frank's general attitude and demeanor. There were only a handful of times while I was in Fiji that I was deeply concerned for the state of the government and every time it was because I had read or heard a comment from Commander Bainimarama. I have never heard a government leader respond so rashly to questions or appear so delusional in the face of his opposition. He refuses to understand why he has political opponents in the first place. He is stubborn and child-like in almost every conversation I've seen, and he doesn't appear to have even considered holding elections sooner than 2014.

In July of this year, the military government banned the Methodist Church from holding their annual conference, stating that if the conference were to cover political issues, it would violate the Public Emergency Regulations. They also arrested key leaders within the church, which was broadcast widely. Bainimarama became frustrated with the media's coverage of these events, saying "I don't know why they're making a big deal out of this because the government and the military have said no (to holding the conference) and that's where the matter should rest. I think it's the press people that are making a big deal out of this."

In 2007, Bainimarama was questioned about the detainments of key media players, like the general manager of the *Fiji Daily Post* and the news director of Fiji Television. He justified his government's actions to suppress unfavorable reporting by saying, "We take people up and find out why they are coming up with these stories, which are false."¹⁵ He made no indication that he understands "taking people up" is illegal in most cases and he purports that every critical story published must have been a blatant lie.

In a meeting with Fijian media executives, it became evident that Bainimarama takes issues very personally when he complained that he thinks local journalists "hate" him. Also at

¹⁴ "Press Muzzled as Military Strengthens Grip on Fiji." *Defence Talk*. War & Conflict News, Voice of America, 14 Apr. 2009. Web. 13 Aug. 2009. <<http://www.defencetalk.com/press-muzzled-as-military-strengthens-grip-on-fiji-17691/>>

¹⁵ La Canna, Xavier. "Fijian Activists Turn to Blogs to Protest Coup." *NZ Herald World*. The New Zealand Herald, 20 Mar. 2007. Web. 13 Aug. 2009. <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=10429847&pnum=2>

the meeting, according to Mr. Netani Rika, editor of the *Fiji Times*, the Commodore “became agitated when the media representatives made it clear they would not ‘roll over and do what he wanted.’”¹⁶ Commodore Bainimarama refused to explain how Evan Hannah and Russell Hunter, Australian journalists deported for less than legitimate reasons, had breached their work permits. He could have said, “That’s a matter of national security and I’m sorry but I can’t say more than that.” But instead, the actual words he used were: “There’s no use discussing that matter. This person, Russell Hunter, and the other, Hannah whatever-his-name is, are not coming back.”

He seems high-strung and incredibly defensive and the worry is that this will lead to a greater escalation in human rights abuses. Thankfully, as information and communication have become more readily available to the public, there’s hope that it will be far more difficult for Frank to get away with such violations of human rights. I say this because on July 22, military officers took Ro Teimumu Kepa to the army camp in the middle of the night after she offered to host the Methodist conference that the Bainimarama government had cancelled just days before. Word got out that she was being held and dozens of her family members, villagers and supporters descended on the camp demanding her release, leaving the military little choice but to acquiesce. Fortunately for the Fijian people, the government is still being restrained by the fear of full exposure as a true military dictatorship. Frank continues to insist that he supports democratic rule and with a communication structure as advanced as Fiji’s along with anonymous bloggers watching their every move, it will be more difficult for him to contradict his statements by using extreme military force without the world knowing about it the next morning. One hopes this will help to hold him accountable to Genocide Watch, Human Rights Watch and the rest of the international community as well as to his own people.

The Present Situation

Fiji really does seem to be pulling through this period of military rule with grace. The devaluation of the dollar would suggest that as purchasing power has weakened significantly, living conditions have deteriorated along with it. Fortunately for most Fijians, the situation as I saw it is more hopeful than the world anticipated. Tourism may be less vibrant than anticipated, but there was definitely no shortage of *kai va lani* wandering through the towns, the markets, the villages or the islands. While military detainments continue, it is likely that increased visibility due to continued reporting and daily blogging will make it ever more difficult for Bainimarama to carry on with serious abuses of human rights. The Prime Minister has stated that he will only accept “journalism of hope” and he has deported members of the press, posted censors in newsrooms and threatened to shut down whole newspapers to ensure it. But despite ever-stricter regulations, the media is enduring, even if they’re sleeping with one eye open.

¹⁶ Wilson, Ashleigh. "I'll Close Media: Fiji Dictator." *The Australian Business*. The Australian, 6 May 2008. Web. 13 Aug. 2009. <<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,23652185-7582,00.html>>

Moving forward, the international community (Australia, New Zealand, the US, the Commonwealth, the UN, the Pacific Islands Forum and the EU) will continue to stand firmly against the illegal government. While they are right to fulfill international aid pledges allocated for health and education, they will withhold other funding, such as the F\$350 million grant to improve productivity in the sugarcane industry, as a means for economic sanctions. Still, the Asian Development Bank has announced that they expect Fiji's economy to contract this year by as much as by 0.4%. "The global economy is showing signs of stabilizing, but the full impact from the downturn in the U.S., Australia and New Zealand has yet to reach 14 island nations in the region." Prospects for Fiji's tourism industry, as both a honeymooner's paradise and a VolunTourism destination, may help assuage the blow to its overall economy until it, too, can pull out of recession. Earlier elections aren't likely, but the Commonwealth plans to engage diplomatically with the regime and their discussions may prove fruitful. The chances of a counter-coup are slim to none as well, mostly for a lack of powerful, armed opposition to the military junta. As one of my friends put it, "They have all the guns." So while the outgoing chairman of the Pacific Islands Forum, Niue's Premier Toke Talagi, has urged Fijians to "take responsibility for the restoration of democracy by rising up in (civil) protest," others, like the prime ministers of Australia¹⁷ and New Zealand,¹⁸ fear this would lead to an escalation in violence and have publicly discouraged such action. Thanks to support from these moderating voices, a peaceful return to democracy seems more likely than violent disobedience.

I've spent a lot of time in the four weeks since I left Fiji learning more about the view from the outside. I've researched more economic figures. I've listened to more of Bainimarama's speeches. And I've read more reports from the Human Rights Watch and stories like that of American journalist Anna Lenzer, who was arrested recently for reporting about the Fiji Water Corporation. I've been amazed at what a different experience I had and what a different impression I got. Is it possible that all these reports and stories are wrong or exaggerated? Or could I really have missed all these terrible things going on around me? Was I being a *tubelight* for my entire six weeks in Fiji and not just for the six minutes it took me to clue in to the high-stick rule?

In my attempts to balance what I read with what I saw, I first concluded that my having spent only 35 minutes in the city of Suva probably had a good deal to do with it. While it wasn't crawling with soldiers as I was expecting, most of the reports of human rights abuses and detainments, including Ms. Lenzer's, do come from the capital city. As such, though residents of Lautoka and of the villages are up-to-date on the news, the people of Suva are more cognizant of the daily human rights violations.

After more thought, I realized it's really the fortitude of the Fijian people that makes the view from the inside brighter than it perhaps should be. The list of challenges facing Fijians today is anything but short. They're threatened with painful side effects of a devalued currency,

¹⁷ "Australian PM Wants Peaceful Path for Fiji." *Raw Fiji News*. 5 Aug. 2009. Web. 20 Aug. 2009. <<http://rawfiji.news.wordpress.com/2009/08/05/australian-pm-wants-peaceful-path-for-fiji/>>

¹⁸ "NZ's Prime Minister Responds to Call for Civil Disobedience in Fiji." *Radio New Zealand International*. 6 Aug. 2009. Web. 20 Aug. 2009. <<http://www.rnzi.com/pages/news.php?op=read&id=48233>>.

uncertainty regarding the tourism industry, a military dictatorship that ignores the rule of law, a self-appointed prime minister who sounds childish and delusional, illegal detainments of innocent civilians and stringent censorship of a once free and vibrant media. But there's hope. Journalists who keep reporting, bloggers who keep blogging and human right activists who keep lobbying are all an important voice in Fiji's reaction to this latest coup while those who are less vocal are participating as well. The children's home workers who keep caring for orphans, the teachers and coaches who keep educating the youth, the computer technicians who keep developing technology, the city shop owners who keep serving their customers and the sugarcane farmers who keep growing and harvesting – all are contributing to a society gracefully enduring this military dictatorship. The strength, patience and propensity to trust that are inherent in Fiji's culture have kept the nation afloat thus far; and I share their optimism as we wait for their new constitution, the racially-free elections they're due and the prosperous, civilian democracy the people so deserve.