

Frankly Speaking - Fiji army commander Frank Bainimarama speaks out

By Robert Keith-Reid (from www.pacificislands.cc)

Quite a few people want Commodore Frank Bainimarama eased from his job as commander of Fiji's 3500-man strong army.

Some people have tried to ease him out.

In November 2000, one of the objects of a flopped but bloody mutiny at the Queen Elizabeth Barracks, Suva, was to kill Bainimarama.

A year later, the police and army foiled a plot to kidnap Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and Bainimarama.



Commodore Frank Bainimarama...frank about Fiji's law and order situation.

Last year, some members of the ex-servicemen's association mounted a petition for Bainimarama's removal as army commander after he rejected their demand for a F\$250,000 (US\$125,000) "goodwill" payment they alleged is due to them. This is in addition to the more than F\$200 million they are claiming from the government.

A few weeks ago, parliamentarian Samisoni Tikoinasau urged the government to "discipline" Bainimarama for "insubordination".

Tikoinasau is a brother of George Speight, now in jail for life for high treason.

Bainimarama has a low opinion of Speight, as you will read later. He can stay where he is, in jail, for years, the army commander says.

For some time it has been clear that the government would also like to see the back of Bainimarama.

It has offered him the enticement of being Fiji's High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur, London, and currently Wellington, and backed his unsuccessful application for a job as a United Nations peace force commander.

Bainimarama dismisses persistent rumours and reports, since Islands Business originally interviewed him, that he's since decided to go to Wellington.

In recent months, there have been persistent reports in the local media, partially confirmed by Home Affairs Minister Joketani Cokanasiga, to the effect that "Bainimarama's contract will not be renewed" when it expires at the end of this year.



Two of a kind...Commodore Frank Bainimarama with former FMF Commander Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, now Fiji parliamentary speaker.

Bainimarama, who joined the army's naval squadron in 1975 and rose to become its commander, told Islands Business: "There never was any intention to move to any other area from the outset. I made the military my career, am enjoying it, and like most in the military intend to stay on

until retiring age. I was made head of the military in 1999 and intend to stay until I am 55. There was never any contract signed in 1999 on my resuming as chief of the military.

"But I guess the powers that be can remove me for non-performance. But I thought I and the military have been doing extremely well considering the circumstances."

He says that normally he would have expected to remain army commander until the retiring age of 55. He's now 49.

"So you have another six years?"

"Yes."

"You are willing to stay on until your are 55?"

"Yes, until 55. There was no plan for me to go anywhere, and this has been strengthened recently by issues that need to be addressed. I am of the view that the choice to change careers should be mine."

The "unfinished business" includes the completion of army trials of soldiers involved in the mutinies and the small number of soldiers who in May 2000 joined George Speight, a minor local businessman who was suddenly promoted to the chairmanship of two government timber corporations, in the armed seizure of Parliament.

Then Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and most of his cabinet members were held hostage there for 56 days. Speight claimed he was freeing indigenous Fijians of political domination by Fiji's Indian citizens.

There is a list of other business Bainimarama wishes to complete.

"I have unfinished business with the military. One is the court martial. We have two outstanding cases of which I am the convening officer. Two are the court cases (prosecutions of civilians on coup-related charges). I thought we should see the end of that.

"Three, we have a defence review coming up. There is no doubt that the review will focus on the roles and participation of the military during the events of 2000, which will have implications on the force structure. I want to be around to answer those queries.

"Four, we have a review of conditions of pay and services in progress. There are a lot of other issues I'm involved in. But first and foremost are the general court martials. I am the convening officer for them.

"Another matter is, I understand there are moves to take some of my people to court for the deaths of some of the CRW people (four members of the now disbanded Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit) who were allegedly beaten to death by loyalist soldiers during the mutiny. That's been investigated."

The other issue, he says, is that "I together with the military have unfinished business with the community at large in that we want to assist the government in the removal of the continued threat to the security of the nation.

"One does not have to be smart to realise that the security situation in Fiji is quite fluid, and we have to continuously adjust ourselves to ensure that the air and feeling of uncertainty is removed from our midst."

Why is the Fiji Government anxious to see Bainimarama go?

The Fiji media reports it this way: Certain political leaders are anxious to "go softly" on the investigation and prosecution of all coup suspects and want life and long jail sentences imposed on convicted army mutineers to be cut. Their wish is to placate anti-Indian Fijian nationalists whose enmity could undermine the government's power. Bainimarama is an obstacle. He opposes "going soft" and clemency for anyone, including Speight, the convicted traitor, now serving a sentence of life imprisonment.



Fiji soldiers...a review of their salaries and conditions is in progress.

If that is the case, then the government has a problem in trying to dump the army commander or simply sacking him.

While Bainimarama might be an anathema in some places, he's regarded as a national hero by tens of thousands of citizens who crave for assured stability and peace for the country.

Bainimarama is promising to secure and maintain that.

After the invasion of Parliament Bainimarama briefly led a military government and negotiated the release of Speight's hostages, all of whom were released, some battered, but none dead.

Bainimarama quickly turned over power to a civilian interim regime and made it clear that the army stood for law, order and constitutional government.

He emphatically says that this remains the case.

The army's role was in complete contrast to its purely nationalist-inspired 1987 coup against an Indian-dominated government. Many Fiji Islanders believe that in 2000 it redeemed itself by rescuing the country from being stolen by a small group of armed crooks, thugs and fanatics that the police and remaining elements of legal government, in the form of the then President, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, were powerless to deal with.

As frequent letters published by local newspapers show, a lot citizens continue to regard Bainimarama as a man to put their trust in.

Prior to the Islands Business talk with Commodore Bainimarama, conducted in an office he sometimes uses outside the barracks in the now disbanded Fiji Intelligence Service's former headquarters near Government House, the local media had reported that he was digging his heels in against pressures to "go easy" on convicted mutineers and others.

Some reports said the government tried to pressure him through the present president, Ratu Josefa Iloilo, who is elderly and ailing.

Bainimarama flatly denied a report that he's told Qarase that he should resign if he loses a case in which Chaudhry is claiming eight cabinet seats for his Fiji Labour Party. But some other reports are correct, he says.

Bainimarama says he was offered the Fiji High Commissioner post for Malaysia in 2001 and more recently to the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

Earlier this year he agreed to go to Wellington, but then changed his mind for reasons he felt he should not disclose.

Asked about reports that he had blocked efforts to secure a presidential pardon for Speight, he replied: "Well, we know that is not going to happen. I mean, why should a man who turned Fiji upside down, be pardoned? Will the rest of the prisoners (in Fiji's main prisons at Naboro and Korovou) be also released?"

"The stance of the Fiji military in this regard is fairly well known in that people who were responsible in the illegal activities of 2000 should be taken to task and if sentenced, should serve out their sentences in full."

Bainimarama says when he leaves the army his successor will be his land force and deputy commander, Colonel Iowane Naivalurua.

"The military should always be headed by someone from within."

Each Saturday Bainimarama speaks on Radio Fiji's Fijian language service.

His aim is to brief Fijians on the army's thinking on security issues.

He wishes that some talks were translated into English. The gist of what he says is evidence that the army's relationship with some of its political masters is not a comfortable one.

"The public should be aware of leaders who have personal agendas because of the events of 2000, and that good governance means the rule of law must be followed.

"In one recent talk I said that the political climate post-coup changed dramatically from 1987.

"In 1987, the coup was conducted by the military with the backing of the vanua. After the post-coup election, the government was led by none other than the Major-General (coup leader Steven Rabuka) and there was a certain collusion between the military and the government of the day.

"What the government wanted, the military gave, and what the military wanted, the government gave. We were part and parcel of the same entity.

"There is a marked difference now. In 2000 we had the power, and we gave the power back on the understanding that the military must not be in a position to govern.

"It doesn't look well in the international community. We are talking about globalisation and it would not augur well for Fiji. We should give it (government) back to politicians.

"Politics being politics, and with the structure of our constitution, we must accept the fact that those that involved themselves in the illegal activities of 2000 (pending the outcome of police investigation) will also come in (be elected to the present Parliament.)

"We said okay, that's all right; there's no problem as long as they govern properly and good governance means that the rule of law must be followed.

"We've now discovered that's not the case. So we have decided we must play our part in the governance of this country and provide the government with continued advise on security issues with regards to the rule of law.

"That is why I am being attacked by politicians and ministers alike.

"I've been told I'm to stay away from politics. But that is the interpretation of those who don't want us to tell people about what is happening. Isn't politics and security tied? Aren't they interwoven?

"We are of the view that if we stay away from politics from this particular issue, the people who have the 'mandate' to lead and who have a private agenda because of the events of 2000, will do what they want, and who is going to stop them?

Islands Business asked: "So there is a core of officers who think the army should conduct itself in a certain manner?"

"Yes."

"And they are unhappy with the way the civilian government is pushing things and have decided to resist that push?"

"That's right. But only resist the push in one direction; not in the governance of the country. We stay away from that. Only when it touches security and when we see people interfere in the rule of law being followed."

Bainimarama says efforts to secure lesser sentences and clemency are to "please these (coup supporters) people and this is certainly a move to undo all the work the military and the security and judiciary have done all these years".

Recalling the first days of the coup, Bainimarama related: "When I first heard it was George Speight, I knew it had nothing to do Fijians. I knew it had nothing to do with indigenous rights. I said 'who the hell is George Speight?'

"The last person I talked to said, 'Oh, this guy Speight jumped over the fence with seven people and he's got the government.'

"I said, 'that can't be right. Why? Because Speight is an old man and he is going to get a heart attack running around like that. I said there's only Sam Speight, (George's father) who is a parliamentarian, I knew from some grog sessions.

"Then I suddenly remembered this bald-headed guy who was in the papers for some mahogany deal that went wrong; so I knew it had nothing to do with Fijian rights; nothing to do with indigenous rights. It had to do with mahogany (concessions) and the losers from the previous elections, people who would like to take advantage of a change in government to get new positions, and hangers on who thought they could get a piece of the pie.

"We knew that. That's proven by just looking at the people who got into parliament from day one."

Bainimarama, who was in Norway at the time the coup happened, said on his return to Suva: "On the first day after my return, two things were fairly clear.

"Somebody has given the support of the vanua. George Speight is an unknown quantity. It was clear that certain Fijian chiefs (Bainimarama didn't want to name them) wanted to persuade the Great Council of Chiefs to back George Speight.

"It was fairly clear to me that, one, Speight had been endorsed from the vanua. Somebody had given him Fijian support. Two: someone has promised him the military."

In the tense days that followed, Bainimarama says he told one group of chiefly Speight sympathisers: "Look, listen to me; if we don't do what I am trying to get us to do (restore democratic government) we will go back to 1800s, and you know what happened in the 1800s? War. (Fijians engaged constantly in tribal warfare at that time).

"Is that where you people want to take us back to? Sure, we are getting a lot of pressures from our chiefs, but we must explain to the people what needs to be done to get us back on track.

"Last week (in his weekly broadcast) I was talking about the law; the law is what drives and brings stability to the land.

"We throw that out of the window and there will be none of us sitting around like this; you won't be writing. There won't be anyone in jail. We will be shooting each other looking for food. We must let people know the right path to be followed. You have to stand up to these people that talk down to you."

Bainimarama says the army has a pretty clear idea of the story behind May 19, 2000, but not all of it.

"You know, what we need to do is get George Speight out and sit him down with a pen and paper. We were too hasty in taking him to Nukulau (island jail) in the first instance. We keep telling ourselves that. When we arrested him, we should not have taken him to Nukulau there and then; we should have got him a pen and paper and threatened him to write the story." Speight's rating" has gone to zilch," he says.

"There's not going to be another George Speight, I can tell you that. He may be released in may be 12 years. Not now, because of the stance of the military."

Speight isn't "safe anywhere off Nukulau," Bainimarama says.

"His brother (an MP) is saying 'I can collect 10,000 signatures easily (for Speight's release)'. We could collect 800,000 to keep George at Nukulau."

In his weekly broadcasts, the army commander says: "I want to reach the Fijian people. That's the people we need to touch.

"In the Fijian broadcast sessions we tell the people we don't want anyone creating unrest. If certain people are thinking that in order to save themselves they can come out and create trouble for all of us, I can only say that, contrary to the events of 2000, we will not be standing around twiddling our thumbs in the middle of the street. They will face the full brunt of the military."

In the months ahead of Fiji, there is the risk of more unrest, he says.

"That's certainly a worry. True nationalism will come up. They will use that as an excuse for nationalism to rear its ugly head again. That's why every Saturday morning in informing the public about the happenings within the military, I would like to allay fears and assure the community that we will look after them if something hits the fan and tell (troublemakers) 'look it's not going to work. You start anything and you'll face the full brunt of the law and anything after that, you'll face the military.

"That is what we stress in the military all the time; to always do good so that people put their trust in you. They don't want to be putting their trust in an organisation that is corrupt."