

speight of violence inside Fiji's 2000 coup

Michael Field, Tupeni Baba & Unaisi Nabobo-Baba

A dramatic account of what really went on during the George Speight led Fiji coup in 2000 is being published this month by Reed New Zealand, marking the fifth anniversary of the drama.

Speight of Violence: inside Fiji's 2000 coup details the coup and speculates on the shadowy figures behind it all.

On the hot Friday morning of 19 May 2000, Speight led a small group of soldiers and failed politicians to Parliament where Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry had just marked the first anniversary of his election as the Pacific nation's first ethnic Indo-Fijian leader.

Chaudhry and his government were to be held hostage for 56 days, during which time the military took over.

Veteran Pacific journalist Michael Field, who covered the coup and subsequent court cases after it, provided the framework and narrative for the book while one of the hostages, then Deputy Prime Minister Dr Tupeni Baba, recounts his experiences. His partner, Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, reveals the tensions and sufferings of the families caught in the drama.

While a hostage Dr Baba kept a secret diary which he uses to reveal the drama in those 56 days, while Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, provides intimate accounts of connections between the hostages, the plotters and the families. Dr Baba had the rare distinction of being inside two Parliament for two coups – he was a member of parliament the day in 1987 when his relative, Sitiveni Rabuka, seized the assembly.

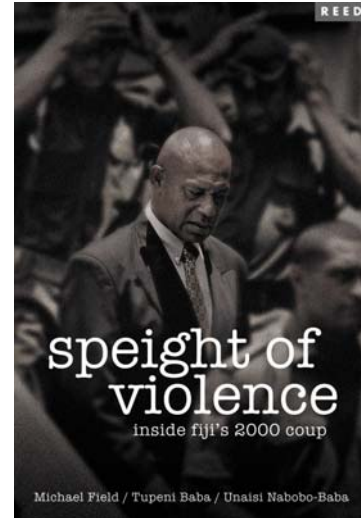
The book opens with the dramatic transcript from Parliament: “This is a civil coup by the people, the taukei people and we ask you to please retire to your Chamber right now, Mr. Speaker. Please co-operate so nobody will get hurt.”

Speight of Violence reveals for the first time the way in which Chaudhry seized the leadership of the Fiji Labour Party to become prime minister – despite assurances to all communities during the 1999 election campaign that the post would go to Dr Baba.

“In the initial discussions, the issue of leadership was raised in a general way and there was an understanding that a Fijian would be prime minister,” Dr Baba recalls in the book, adding that Mr Chaudhry's decisions had led to the death of the spirit of the Fiji Labour Party.

Five years after the coup it is still not clear who was really behind it and reveals where the plotting took place and who was involved.

Speight and a gang of soldiers managed to seize Parliament and the book recounts the drama with eye witness accounts, and speculation on what was really going on. Everybody noticed how Speight kept using his cellphone furiously. *Speight of Violence* names those he called.



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Dr Baba provides a vivid account of his 56 days as a hostage including the first insight into the way in which the special forces soldiers beat Mr Chaudhry unconscious and how there were real fears that he would die of his injuries. Dr Baba recalls from his diary the way in which some of his captors acting on disinformation they were being fed asked him if he was a freemason and whether he drank human blood.

The book is critical of the role played in the early days of the coup by Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon and the United Nations special representative to newly independent East Timor, Sergio de Mello who was to die in a truck bomb explosion in Iraq in 2003.

Unaisi Nabobo-Baba recounts the pressure on the families of the hostage, publishing the Red Cross letters that were carried between prisoners and families by the late John Scott. She writes of how the authorities cut off the pay to the families, but how the families had to buy all the food needed to feed the hostages in Parliament. As the hostages complained of the large numbers of flies, families tried to provide fly-spray – but the captors would not allow it in case it carried a secret weapon.

When freedom finally came, the book captures how the captors and the prisoners drank kava together in accordance with Fijian custom and Dr Baba, for the first time, writes about its emotional significance: “We were sitting together, hostages and our captors, passing around bowls of yaqona or kava and observing our relationship in the sequence kava is offered and drunk and the clapping that followed each serving.”

Field provides colourful coverage of the arrests and trials that followed, including the moment George Speight was sentenced to death. Among the book’s many photographs there are, for the first time, pictures of his comfortable prison on the island he is now detained on.

The book also offers gruesome accounts of what happened in the military mutiny which occurred in November 2000 as some of the die-hard Speight supporters tried to overthrow the military.

In the book Field explores the many characters involved in the plotting and provides analyses of their roles and deals with the question of what the coup was really about.



Michael Field



Tupeni Baba



Unaisi Nabobo-Baba

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For more information or to arrange an interview with Michael Field, Tupeni Baba or Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, please contact Tammy Taylor, Reed Publishing (NZ) Ltd, Ph: (09) 441 2955 Email: ttaylor@reed.co.nz

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