



## **Fiji Human Rights Commission**

### **A RESPONSE TO THE FIJI HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION DIRECTOR'S REPORT ON THE ASSUMPTION OF EXECUTIVE AUTHORITY BY COMMODORE J V BAINIMARAMA, COMMANDER OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI MILITARY FORCES**

This Response has been prepared by a group of respected senior lawyers who between them have considerable experience and expertise in human rights and constitutional law nationally and internationally. This Response was commissioned by Commissioner Shamima Ali of the Fiji Human Rights Commission who remains to date the only legally and constitutionally appointed Commissioner at the Commission. For obvious reasons the lawyers are, at this stage, unable to be named to protect them and their families. Commissioner Ali is willing to disclose their names to the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

#### **1.0 Introduction**

The Report prepared by the Director of the Fiji Human Rights Commission, Dr Shaista Shameem, purports to carry the authority of the Commission. The status of the Report is as yet unclear given that the Acting Chair of the Commission was not appointed by the Constitutional Offices Commission (ss.163(1), 42(3) Fiji Constitution). The remaining Commissioner, Ms Shamima Ali, has publicly disassociated herself from the Report and the position of the Second Commissioner is vacant. It is also puzzling that the Director feels able to determine the legality of the circumstances subsequent to 6pm, Tuesday 5 December, 2006. That is not properly the brief of the Commission for obvious reasons. The timing of the Report is also mystifying and many are of the view that it is not coincidental that it should be released at the same time as the appointment of the head of the military as self-styled Caretaker Prime Minister. Throughout this response, the monograph authored by Shameem will be referred to as the Report.

## **2.0 Legality of the Assumption of Executive Authority by the Commander**

### **2.1 Necessity**

The explanation of the doctrine or principle of necessity, which is incorrectly referred to repeatedly as the “duty” of necessity and which the Report conflates with the separate constitutional reserve powers of the head of state, in the Report is highly questionable for a number of reasons which are beyond the scope of this Response.

However, importantly, for present purposes, the Report assumes that any Court reviewing the actions of the Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), at 6pm on 5 December, 2006 would not query the latter’s reasons for invoking the doctrine. This is an erroneous and misleading assumption. The Court of Appeal in the Chandrika Prasad case concluded on the facts of the 2000 attempted coup and the Commander’s intervention that – even then, in response to a crisis involving armed rebels taking the Government hostage - there was no basis for the Commander to invoke the doctrine of necessity to assume power to the permanent exclusion of the elected Government. It is hard to see in these circumstances- the military creating a ‘crisis’ and then purportedly intervening to solve it by removing the Government and purporting to dissolve Parliament - that a Court would not reach the same conclusion. The country was at peace. The economy was functioning if not at optimum levels. The Multiparty government was in control and, for the first time since the 1997 Constitution was enacted, working. The electorate widely welcomed its establishment. The only challenge was posed by the RFMF as the self-styled watchdog of the government and “guardian” of the public interest. The perceived threat was one generated by the RFMF creating a crisis where there was none.

As a matter of law, the doctrine of necessity cannot be invoked or taken advantage of by the persons who create or precipitate the necessity.

The Report having widened the doctrine of necessity to legitimate the Commander’s usurpation of power, then somewhat inconsistently characterizes aspects of the President’s actions post May 2000 and prior to the general election of 2001, as outside the doctrine. It concludes that the general election was therefore invalid, illegal and unconstitutional. This is asserted as a legal certainty despite the fact that the Court of Appeal in Yabaki had declined to consider whether or not the President’s actions that led to the 2001 general election were justified by necessity because rightly or wrongly, the President had acted, the general election, which by then had taken place, rendered the issues moot, and no useful purpose would have been served by considering the complex factual questions, that arise in any necessity

situation. In so deciding the Court of Appeal followed cases from Australia as well as England and Canada.. The Report's assertion regarding the legitimacy of the 2001 general election and the legitimacy of the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) Government that was returned is not supported by the appellate court's decision.

The Report asserts that the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) Government that lost office as a result of the Presidential decisions at issue in the Yabaki litigation was lawfully the Government until the end of the normal constitutional 5-year maximum term of Parliament in 2004. The Report's logic implies that Fiji has not any lawful government thereafter, as a general election did not take place in 2004, the next one actually taking 5 years after the 2001 general election.

The SDL was re-elected at the general election of 2006. The Report asserts that this result was also unlawful.

Principal among the grounds for this assertion is the contention that there had been no national census so that constituency boundaries, that were the same ones used to elect the FLP in 1999 and the SDL, had not been appropriately reviewed prior to the election. The Report omits to point out that the Fiji has a practice of decennial census and that the next census was not due until 2006 and the compilation of its results which takes many months would not have been available until well after the actual general election.

It was open to Shameem herself to bring legal challenges in Court to challenge any aspect of the lead up to and the conduct of the 2006 elections. She did not do so The FLP itself brought a pre-election challenge, which was dismissed by the Court after argument, a result that the FLP saw fit not to appeal. The FLP also challenged only 2 out of the 71 returns from the 2006 general election. One of these was struck out by the Court of Disputed Returns and the other was still being heard when the events of 6 December took place..

During the period from 2001 to until it was deposed, two Qarase governments passed a raft of laws. None have been legally challenged on the basis that the Parliament of Fiji had been unlawfully constituted.

The Report makes reference to the role of the military under the 1990 Constitution. Shameem attempts to argue that the mere reference of the RFMF in the 1997 Constitution amounts to recognition of the RFMF as having the role contained in s.94(3) of the repealed 1990 Constitution, a poor argument on its face. In any event, this is more shortly answered. The relevant provisions of the 1997 Constitution have repealed the earlier sections. When read together, the former cannot stand with the latter. In its consideration of the issue, the Report assumes, without further argument, the validity of

Shameem's interpretation. In the absence of a definitive Court ruling, Shameem is entitled to her opinion but it is not persuasive. This issue was a matter of some public debate a few months ago and no lawyer, except a military one, has supported Shameem's interpretation.

For completeness we provide the relevant provisions:

### **1990 Constitutional Provisions**

#### **Republic of Fiji Military Forces**

94. (1) There shall be a military Force to be called the Republic of Fiji Military Forces.

(2) The Republic of Fiji Military Forces shall be under the command of a Commander who shall be appointed by the President acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister for a term of five years, but shall be eligible for reappointment.

(3) It shall be the overall responsibility of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces to ensure at all times the security, defence and well being of Fiji and its peoples."

In 1997 Parliament promulgated the new 1997 Constitution.

### **1997 Constitutional Provisions**

#### **Section 112 Republic of Fiji Military Forces**

(1) The military force called the Republic of Fiji Military Forces established by the Constitution of 1990 continues in existence.

(2) The President, acting on the advice of the Minister, must appoint a Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces to exercise military executive command of the Forces, subject to the control of the Minister.

(3) The Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces is responsible for:

- (a) making appointments of members of the Forces;
- (b) taking disciplinary action against members of the Forces; and
- (c) removing members from the Forces.

(4) The Parliament may make laws relating to the Republic of Fiji Military Forces.

#### **Section 195 Repeals and transitional**

(2) Despite the repeal of the Constitution of the Sovereign Democratic Republic of Fiji (Promulgation) Decree 1990:

(a) Chapter XIV of the Constitution of 1990 continues in force in accordance with its tenor; (*our comment – on immunity*)

(b) subsections 132 (1), (2), (3), (5) and (6) and section 133 of the Constitution of 1990 continue in force according to their tenor as if:

- (i) the offices referred to in subsection 133 (3) included references to the Secretary-General to the Parliament and the Commissioner of Police;
- (ii) (ii) the reference in paragraph 133 (4)(a) to the Judicial and Legal Services Commission included a reference to the Judicial Service Commission; and
- (iii) (iii) the reference in paragraph 133 (4)(b) to the Police Service Commission were a reference to the Disciplined Services Commission;”

The list of provisions not repealed in section 195 (2) of the 1997 Constitution is exhaustive. It does not include section 94 of the 1990 Constitution. It appears reasonably clear that the omission of a reference to section 94 of the 1990 Constitution reveals that there was no intention to retain it in the 1997 Constitution.

We are of opinion that if the sections are still considered arguable, the correct and better view is that the 1997 Constitution deliberately abandoned reference to those parts of the 1990 Constitution on its expanded role in civil and government affairs on which Shameem and the military rely.

## **2.2 The Qarase Government 2001- 2005**

The Report finds an intention on the part of the Qarase Government to undermine the Constitution and the entrenched Bill of Rights. It asserts the Qarase Government policies were anti-human rights and discriminatory. Evidence of the Qarase Government’s alleged ethnic propaganda included the statements of certain parliamentarians, the Prime Minister’s defence of the comments as free speech and the introduction of the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill (RTU Bill). The RTU Bill was deeply controversial and opposition to it so widespread that the Qarase Government actually withdrew it and was in the course of re-drafting it with much of its controversial content watered down. The democratic process had in fact had some effect on the Bill.

Shameem takes exception to the Qarase Government’s response to a conclusion by the Commission’s independent evaluator that the Government’s policies of Affirmative Action and the Blue Print violated section 38 of the Constitution concerning equality. The Government was under no obligation to accept the findings of the independent evaluator. It was at liberty to differ with those conclusions. An opinion or finding authored or sanctioned by the Commission is no more than that. Unless sanctioned by the Courts, the Government is not obliged to follow it although it may have persuasive authority. In fact, the Government had responded positively. Approximately

two weeks before the coup, it started advertising publicly for advisers to assist it to evaluate and/or redesign its affirmative action policies.

The Commission has broad powers in respect of human rights. Beyond the conclusions of its independent evaluator, it could have challenged the entire basis for the Affirmative Action and the Blue Print. The Judiciary in Fiji has largely remained independent and impartial. It has not resiled from deciding controversial issues. There was nothing to prevent Shameem from persuading the Commission to mount a legal challenge. The political wisdom of doing so was of course, a related but separate issue.

The Report again refers to the role of the military as if the issue is settled. While the Courts have yet to determine the question, the fact that it chooses to rely on provisions from a repealed (1990) Constitution is revealing. Whether those sections are imported into the present Constitution is a doubtful proposition on its face. We again refer to section 195 of the 1997 Constitution which repeals the 1990 Constitution and subsection (2) of section 195 which 'saves' certain chapters, section and sub sections of its predecessor but does not refer to the provision on which the Report and the military rely.

### **2.3 Elections in May 2006**

The Report impugns the basis of the general elections of May, 2006. It cites the failure to hold a census beforehand as affecting the determination of proper boundaries based on current population figures. The point is well taken. However, in circumstances where the conduct of a cause would probably have meant the extension of the five-year term of Parliament mandated under the Constitution, which was the greater mischief?

The failure to have a census does not mean that the elections were per se unconstitutional, unlawful or invalid.

In relation to the conduct of the elections themselves, various allegations were made in relation to voter registration, conflicts of interest in the registration exercise, faulty registration slips, people registered in the wrong constituencies, failure to comply with Electoral Act in terms of scrutiny of voters rolls, excessive printing of ballot papers, unscheduled polling, unattended ballot boxes left for long periods and conflict of interest in the choice of firms selected to provide security. These are set out in full for completeness. Notwithstanding, international and local observers groups from the European Union, the Pacific Islands Forum, Australia and New Zealand pronounced the elections substantially free and fair. While the elections were not perfect they were credible. None of the innuendos or rumours about electoral fraud and malpractice were proven.

Fiji's 2006 General Elections were the most transparent and closely observed in the country's history. There were observer groups from the European Union, the Commonwealth, the South Pacific Forum, the University of the South Pacific and countless civil society groups as well as disparate individuals. For the sake of completeness, we set out below some of the main conclusions by the principal observer groups:

### **Commonwealth Observer Report**

"We believe that at this General Election the conditions did exist for a free expression of will by the electors and that the results reflected the wishes of the people: this was a credible election.

In coming to that judgment we have taken into account not only our direct observations of the campaign, the state of the register, polling, counting and the results process but also the electoral environment as a whole.

There were shortcomings. However, we do not believe that these resulted from a systematic effort to 'fix' the process. Nor were they on a sufficient scale or of a nature as to threaten the reliability, integrity and credibility of the operation as a whole.

There are procedures for challenges to particular results and political parties and others should use them if they have serious grounds for complaint. However, given our findings we urge every institution and individual in Fiji Islands to accept the overall outcome and then to work together to create a culture of consensus and co-operation in the interests of all the people of the country."

### **European Union Observation Mission**

"Ultimately, we do not consider that the shortcomings identified in our preliminary statement were of sufficient magnitude to fundamentally undermine the validity of the election process."

### **Pacific Islands Forum Election Observer Group**

Election Observers from the Pacific Islands Forum say that on the basis of what is now known, the voting process in Fiji's week long election has been conducted in a fair and credible manner overall, although some features of the process can be improved.

On the basis of these allegations and the alleged shortcomings of the international and local observers, the Report concludes the Laisenia Qarase and the SDL may not have been democratically elected. Allegations need to be proved. Unless any wrongdoing is systematic and widespread, how can the general election be queried? We have a legal system in place established to deal with these situations. Why was recourse not had to them at the relevant time?

Of 71 seats declared, only 2 petitions were filed. One was thrown out on a technicality, whilst the other remains pending. On this basis it must be assumed that the remaining seats, unchallenged, were accepted.

The alleged unconstitutional nature of the 2006 elections and the status of the Government of Laisenia Qarase are then relied on to provide succor for the actions of the Commander and the RFMF on 5 December, 2006.

The Report cites the following ‘facts’ to marshal a case for arguing there was a perception of lack of confidence of the House of Representatives in the Prime Minister as per section 109 (1) of the Constitution. These are itemized in full for reference: the Fiji Labour Party Ministers’ divided loyalties as per the budget; evidence of breakdown of talks over Multiparty Cabinet protocols; the support for the budget by the two members of the Opposition; reports of an indication by the Hon. Robin Irwin of becoming an independent MP again; and evidence of a public outcry against VAT, the proposed Indigenous Claims Tribunal and Qoliqoli Bills as well as the constant calls by the Commander RFMF that the Government accede to its demands.

Where does the issue of confidence arise? The SDL Party had a majority on the floor of the House at all times. It won the budget vote, an issue of confidence in itself, and it matters not whether Fiji Labour Party Ministers had divided loyalties or that the two Oppositions MPs supported the budget. There was indeed adverse public reaction to the increase of VAT in the budget and to the proposed Bills. In what way did it amount to a confidence issue? As for the stance adopted by the military, it went far beyond their accepted role in parliamentary democracies. The impression that is gained from “the facts” as presented by Shameem is a sense of crisis. That, with respect, was generated by the increasingly strident calls and actions of the military in the days leading up to 5 December, 2006. If there was a crisis it was generated by the military and subsequently used as a pretext to interfere with the refreshed mandate of the elected government.

## **2.4 Government Policy, proposed legislation crimes against humanity**

The Report readily criticizes the previous Government's use of parliamentary process to initiate legislation that were discriminatory, reportedly unconstitutional and even constitute crimes against humanity. Whether the purport and intent of the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Promotion of Unity Bill, the Qoliqoli Bill and the Land Claims Tribunal Bill were properly characterized as such is only an opinion. There has been no judicial pronouncement on these draft Bills and indeed none was sought. Unless the legality of proposed legislation or policy is determined by the Courts, it remains that.

Notwithstanding that caveat, the Report has not hesitated to make sweeping accusations unsupported by the evidence. That the Report should further tar the former Government of 'crimes against humanity' and 'ethnic cleansing' phrases which have repugnant connotations in international law and evoke images of Bosnia, Rwanda, Burundi, Cambodia, Sudan and Nazi Germany merely reflects on the Report rather than its target. The use of emotive hyperbole calls into question the Report's judgment and sense of balance and debases the horrors of those crimes referred to above.

The Report also questions the stance adopted by various United Nations agencies and Civil Society Organizations in relation to the Qarase Government. There is a suggestion that these entities 'colluded' in the actions of the latter. Again it fails to substantiate the claims. They are not only serious but border on the libellous because they tarnish reputations without justification. It is disappointing that the Report has, under the pretext of assessing the legalities of the current situation, used the opportunity to vilify those who take issue with its conclusions.

The Report persists with the illusion that the legality of the military takeover was unclear, raises some doubts about the Report's authors understanding of constitutional law. The rationale of Shameem's argument appears to be that the military's action must be considered in the light of the illegal and unconstitutional Government that was ousted. The character of the two previous Governments has already been addressed. The Report's arguments are unconvincing and would be given short shrift in a court of law. It has misapplied the doctrine of necessity and raised objections to the conduct of elections and related issues that ought to have been put at the appropriate time and are now time-barred. It is easier to draw glib conclusions based on one's arguments without the inconvenience of testing them before a judge.

### **3.0 The effect of the military takeover on the Bill of Rights provisions in the 1997 Constitution: compliance audit from December 5<sup>th</sup> 2006**

It is in this regard, that the position taken in the Report is perplexing. In informing the public via interviews and statements over radio and on television that people's rights were limited by the takeover of the military, Shameem seriously misinformed the people of Fiji. This was an inaccurate statement of the true legal position. The military having no lawful powers could not properly limit or curtail citizens' constitutional rights. While the military had indeed seized power, it was contrary to the provisions of the Constitution. The state of emergency provisions of the Constitution had not been complied with. The RFMF had not even purported to issue any 'regulations' limiting people's rights (illegal though they would have been). On what basis had people's right been reduced? On the say so of the RFMF? The Commission may have been better advised to affirm that while our rights were intact, it was perhaps prudent to act with restraint because the Commission's ability to protect people's rights was limited. Instead one was left in little doubt as to where the Director's sympathies lay and indeed the Report is one long paen of praise for the RFMF.

Rather than defend the rights of those who had suffered at the hands of the RFMF, the Report devotes much time and space to questioning their *bona fides*. Under a barrage of criticism for failing to act on the 23 December arrest and brutalizing of six democracy activists, Shameem publicly stated that the Commission "is not a rescue agency". She then publicly questioned whether all of them were "genuine pro-democracy activists". What then is the responsibility of the Commission at times like these when fundamental rights and freedoms are under their greatest threat? The Report is coloured by a perception that the RFMF has done us a great service by removing an unconstitutional, undemocratic, racist and anti-human rights regime (i.e. the two Qarase Governments) which held us in thrall for the last six and half years. In accomplishing this feat, what matters it that a few of our rights are compromised and some people are humiliated and brutalized by the RFMF. The problem with this proposition is the fallacy of the reasoning which this proposition seeks to correct.

### **4.0 Observations and recommendations regarding duties and responsibilities of Institutions of the State, public official and other relevant stakeholders**

It is indeed true that in the year 2000 judges of the High Court were divided on the issues of drafting decrees for the military government, the abrogation of the Constitution and advising His Excellency the President. Some of those schisms remain to this day. With the benefit of hindsight and with the passage of time, all the judges were committed to the rule of law but differed on the means of how it could best be preserved. What transpired underscores the need for a common position to be

adopted by our Courts. This is not the time for recriminations but learning from what has happened. There were clear signs after the 5 December events that the judiciary had learned from the 2000 events and had adopted a common position.

#### **4.2 The Attorney-General**

The particular issues raised in relation to the Office of the Attorney-General are well-taken and need to be borne in mind by all future officeholders. However, the Report rushes to judgment on the issue of the unconstitutionality of the three Bills referred to earlier. That is a finding only a Court can make after considering the arguments. Until that point is reached, the assessment of validity of a Bill by the Attorney-General is as good as that advanced in the Report.

#### **4.3 Fiji Law Society**

There are differing views about the validity of the Society's decision to suspend the practicing certificates of the Army Legal Services personnel. Shameem's public statements – that they had not been given a hearing and that this was a human rights matter – is wholly misconceived. This was not a human rights issue. This was an issue of process under the Legal Practitioners Act 1997, under which the Army Legal Services personnel – lawyers, after all – had recourse at minimum to the process of judicial review. The alacrity with which the Commission took up the Army lawyers' cases was the subject of some public comment.

The reference to the potential conflict of interest issues on the part of the members of the Society is interesting. How does this relate to an assessment of the legality of the Commander's and the RFMF's actions on 5 December, 2006? This is a matter that is left to the good sense and judgment of individual members of the Society. Where there are perceived breaches, it is the duty of all members of the Society to advise the relevant entity.

#### **4.4 The role of NGOs and the International community**

The Report seeks to cast suspicion on the opposition to the military takeover of 5 December, 2006 by making mention of the funds received by civil society organizations from the metropolitan countries and the European Community. There is a suggestion that those entities are compromised by such connections. This charge is as baseless as it is derogatory of those committed activists who have been vocal and have spoken out about some of the less appealing qualities of military rule. To cast doubt on the integrity of their beliefs,

because they happen to differ from the Report's perspective, is revealing of Shameem's real motives, rather than any lack in those criticized.

Moreover, it is somewhat disconcerting that the Report should devote much of its attention to the alleged shortcomings of civil society, and exonerate the perpetrators of the military takeover of a whole series of illegalities. The Report has to justify the unjustifiable. What is illegal is not rendered legal by a lengthy defence premised on incorrect legal propositions and misapplications of the law. The thrust of the Report makes common cause with the RFMF's perspective. That alone ought to raise doubts about its impartiality and lack of bias. That it appears to have attracted some support among the public is understandable. Legal issues are complex enough without the further complication provided by the constitutional experts of the situation.

Those who support the Report's findings need to ask themselves whether it is because they accept the arguments, or whether it is because it makes it easier for them to overlook (and accept) the illegality of 5 December, 2006. If they accept the arguments, can they explain why they have been made this late and at this time? Shameem has served in her position since 1999. She has never previously raised any of the questions of the status of the two Qarase Governments. Why is the position the Report is now taking so supportive of the RFMF? Is it mere coincidence? Why does the case put by the Commander RFMF on 5 December, 2006 and subsequently echo the stance the Report has taken? This point is made in light of the fact that the Commander has no legal background and would not normally be familiar with concepts such as the doctrine of necessity. He would certainly not ordinarily be expected to make lengthy pronouncements with respect to legal precedent, as he did in his first post-coup statement. These are questions that need to be answered as the Report has not resiled from pronouncing quite confidently on the legality of the situation post 5 December, 2006.

#### 4.5 **The Fiji Human Rights Commission**

The Report's pronouncements in this regard that it

*"...is required to be seen to be acting impartially and independently of all sides and at the same time able to make judicious statements about the need to maintain respect for human rights and law and order."*

are hollow sounding indeed. The Director has regrettably compromised the Commission's position. The elaborate explanations it makes in defence of its role are best ignored. This report is a case in point and a direct contradiction of the assertion that "*Commissions cannot take sides in a political conflict.*" It is little more than an apology for the Commander and the RFMF as has been observed elsewhere.

## **5.0 The RFMF's position as de facto Government of Fiji**

The discussion under this heading is confusing. The Report makes reference to human rights being a paramount consideration but the Director has not observed this in practice. The Report appears to have been more concerned about the general public understanding the need for circumspection in the exercise of their rights and complying with the RFMF's heavy-handed strictures on dissent.

Reference is then made to a recent constitutional case concerning discrimination on the grounds of age. What is the connection between that case and the military takeover (other than, perhaps, that they are both enthusiastically supported by Shameem)?

It is in the Report's support for the role of the RFMF under the 1990 Constitution that discloses its slant. It goes to extraordinary lengths to put a gloss on the military having an expanded brief in normal life. The explanation may have a reassuring feel among those who have applauded their recent actions. One succumbs to this delusion at his/her peril. This country has had four coups. All have had their genesis in the RFMF with some participation of outside elements. It is an armed military commanded by officers who arrogate to themselves the role of watchdog, for no other reason than their possession of guns that remains a constant threat to our fledgling democracy.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

The Report is riddled with legal inaccuracies, misapplications of the law and a selective reading of case law. What is disturbing is that it claims to be a dispassionate and balanced analysis of the legalities surrounding the RFMF's usurpation of power on 5 December, 2006. It is in fact a veiled justification for the actions of the RFMF on 6 December, 2006. What emerges from the Report is a pathological dislike of Prime Minister Qarase and his two Governments. The tragedy is that in confusing the latter with its apparent approval of the RFMF's perspective in relation to its own actions, the Report has compromised the Fiji Human Rights Commission and Shameem's own standing as well as set back the cause of human rights generally in Fiji.

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