

FEATURE

From a ruthless fanatic to a peace messenger

ON a May morning in 1987 the placid South Pacific was stunned by news of the first military coup in its history. Lt-Col Sitiveni Rabuka, at 38, Fiji's third-ranking army officer, had overthrown the recently-elected government. Not a shot was fired. But a time bomb had been placed under Fiji's fragile racial partnership. Ratu Meli Vesikula was in the thick of the upheavals that followed. As spokesman for the extreme Fijian nationalist Taukei movement, he was feared and hated by the Fiji Indians who were the target of much of his venom. Yet today he works tirelessly to repair the damage.

As a chief (Ratu), Ratu Meli knows what it means to have authority. And 23 years overseas in the British army, including six tours of duty in Northern Ireland, gave him frontline experience and taught him the discipline and obedience signalled by his immaculate appearance and clean-cut demeanour. He rose through the ranks to Regimental Sergeant Major and was decorated with an MBE when he was demobbed in 1984 at the age of 40.

On returning to Fiji, Ratu Meli saw a "deterioration in the quality of life of the indigenous people. When I left in 1961 the Fijian community was hardworking, highly productive and almost self-sufficient." Families were breaking up in large numbers. He wanted to find out why.

He took a job as provincial administrator in the hinterland, and set about winning the confidence of the villagers. "At first they were suspicious of me," he remembers, "but when they that I cared, attitudes changed. Things began to improve socially and in education and farming." He moved his Welsh wife Elizabeth and their daughter up to the district, something no previous administrator had done. "I give Elizabeth credit because she had it rough."

When Fiji became independent in 1970, its indigenous people were slightly outnumbered by its Indian population. Descendants of indentured labourers brought by the British to work the sugar cane fields, the Indians excelled in commerce. They had retained their languages, religions and traditions, while maintaining generally amicable relations with their Fijian neighbours. But the independence constitution guaranteed land rights and other privileges for native Fijians and a sense of grievance began to grow among the Indians.

In the April 1987 election, the predominantly Fijian Alliance Party, which had held power since independence, was defeated. The victorious coalition, although headed by a Fijian (Dr Timoci Bavadra) and helped by the votes of disaffected Fijians, was predominantly Indian. Many Fijians had been haunted by the spectre of Indian control, and this seemed to be nearing reality. Some Fijian nationalists began to inflame these feelings of fear, and large demonstrations took place.

The coup that followed dashed immediate hope that multi-racialism would flourish in Fiji. It came as no surprise to Ratu Meli. But, he explains, "I did not realise at that time that the whole Fijian race was being used as a smoke-screen for what was happening. I thought that their cry was spontaneous, and I felt for it as a chief."

Coup leader Major General Rabuka, a colonel then, made no secret of his intentions: the entrenchment of political and economic control in the hands of Fijians, under the authority of the chiefs of Fiji. For centuries these chiefs had governed the people under a complex structure of authority, and in 1874 had invited the British to build their colonial administration on its foundation. It was this authority that Rabuka and his supporters saw as threatened by the election result.

Power was soon handed back to a civilian administration. Fearing that international pressure could lead to political compromise, the Taukei Movement came centre stage. Based on the narrow principle of Fiji for the Fijians, it aimed to force the government to guarantee Fijians permanent paramountcy in their own country. Acts of violence increased, including the burning of Indian homes and businesses.

Ratu Meli was recruited to the Taukei's inner sanctum and was nominated as their spokesman. His name featured prominently in the media as an apostle of racial supremacy. It

was he who early in September 1987 read out an ill-famed statement threatening to put Indians in the lavo (a Fijian oven). "It was all words," he now insists. "We had no intention whatever of carrying it out. It was a symbol to show that we meant business. Our objective was to get the government not to compromise. I speak of these things with great shame."

After Rabuka's second coup in late September, Ratu Meli was given a post in the interim government as Minister for Fijian Affairs. Nine weeks later power was given to the current administration and he was sacked. Feeling betrayed, he led a break-away Taukei faction which continued to press for extremist policies.

Edward Peters interviews Ratu Meli Vesikula in the monthly magazine For A Change which is published by Grosvenor Productions Ltd in London for Moral Re-Armament. As nations armed for war more than 50 years ago, Frank Buchman initiated a world wide move for "moral and spiritual re-armament." Over the years since, Moral Re-Armament (MRA) has spread to every corner of the earth. MRA is a network of people from many cultures and faiths who have decided that "change starts with me". They worked together towards a common goal - to build a world to God's design where every human need is met. In many countries MRA is registered as a charity, but there are neither leaders nor international structures. Money comes from those who believe in MRA ideals. Ratu Meli is a MRA member.

But the seeds of doubt were beginning to grow inside him. The coups, he felt, had returned to power the very people who had failed to deal with the poverty and backwardness of indigenous Fijians. He felt he had been used by others with hidden motives. "I was hurt," he says, "and totally at a loss."

During 1988 some of his colleagues died - in car accidents or in mysterious ways. In July his closest friend died of gun-shot wounds. He wondered if he would be next.

It was at this moment of anxiety and political revelation that a spiritual awakening began. A Methodist minister phoned him and said, "I've no doubt you love your people, but what you're doing is wrong. May I see you? I want to help you." Ratu Meli answered, "Yes, come now."

The minister invited him and three others from different sides of the political divide to his home. "Every day for three months we met to talk, pray and study the Bible. The minister had to work hard to get us to take the step towards humility, to shed our prejudice, our hatred and all our hard feelings." One night Ratu Meli was woken by a revelation of God's love. "It dawned on me that God loves everybody, that we are all absolutely equal, and that he is our Father and we are all his children. Slowly I realised that everyone in Fiji was important to its development."

Coming from a former "ruthless fanatic" (his own words), these sentiments represent a radical transformation. Ever since, Ratu Meli had devoted himself to building bridges between the communities in Fiji and "uniting them in love". One of his first actions was to visit Dr Bavadra, the deposed Prime Minister. "My coming was a shock for him and his friends, but he had his arms outstretched. It was a great day."

Last year, at a Moral Re-Armament conference in Suva, Ratu Meli apologised publicly for his past actions. "God must have put his hand on me that day, for I felt so relieved and so happy. I can't explain it in words, but he has been with me ever since."



Y P Reddy (left) with Ratu Meli Vesikula. Both are MRA members.



RATU MELI VESIKULA

Some people are sceptical about the change in Ratu Meli, and suspect his motives. That, he says, is something he has to live with, "part of the price I have to pay for the things I did". He goes on, "I believe that we in Fiji need each other badly. I want identification by race to go out. There is no way Fiji will develop properly without the Indian people or without its Pacific Islanders and others who are here. I see Fiji becoming one nation and one people. If we can learn to live together, we can be an example to the world that nothing is impossible."

Meanwhile, Ratu Meli is devoting himself to the needs of the eight villages under his chiefly jurisdiction. Living conditions are primitive, with no electricity and an unreliable water supply. As a good army man, he leads from the front. "The villagers see me getting up early in the morning to clean up my compound and flower garden. They're been encouraged. Since I moved back, the village is now always clean."

He has set himself the task of countering the influence of kava, a beverage made from a root crop. This drink, which has a sedative effect, is a major problem throughout Fiji. "People drink themselves silly and nothing gets done," Ratu Meli points out. "Traditionally, it's a ceremonial drink. As a rule, I don't take it now - a chief's protest that something being done in his name is killing his community." He says that many in these villages have stopped drinking.

A co-operative store which was on its last legs has been revived and expanded, and now sells groceries, food and second-hand clothing. Bread is delivered daily. A kerosene freezer has been repaired so that butter, milk and meat can be sold. These things were not available before without a visit to Suva, an hour away.

Soon Ratu Meli hopes to install two new ice boxes so that villagers can sell their freshly-caught fish for cash. A new marketing shed will enable crops, too, to be exchanged for money, encouraging people to produce more. A savings bank agency will be opened. Plans are well advanced for a secondary school, and for proper water and sewage facilities.

Ratu Meli has a clear vision. "Half of Fiji is not producing - the Fijian half. Until it starts to produce, and to produce well, Fiji will be handicapped economically. If more is produced, costs will go down and nobody will starve. People will begin to have the spirit again where they look after their own who are now begging on the streets."

"The development of the people themselves is the most important thing - getting the spirit inside them to grow and to spread. This is of course the most important factor in Fiji - not a new constitution, not a booming economy, not any other material factor, but the rebuilding of Fiji's moral fibre."