

## Noted

# Human touch, revealing media insights into Speight's coup

*Speight of Violence: Inside Fiji's 2000 coup*, by Michael Field, Tupeni Baba and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba. Auckland: Reed Books, 2005. 288pp. ISBN 0790010178

AT 10.45am on the morning of 19 May 2000, Fiji's Parliament was disrupted when six gunmen entered and demanded the government step down. This is how it happened:

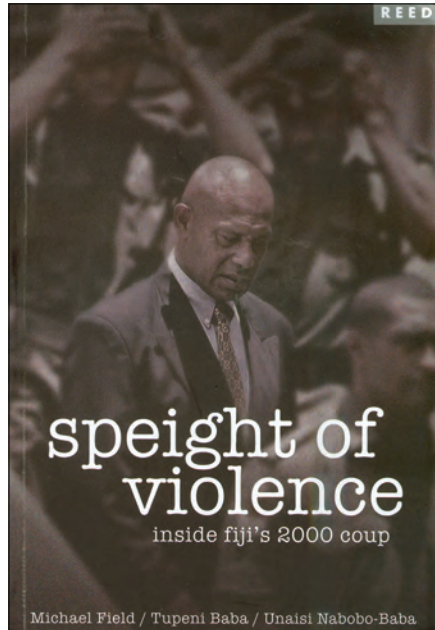
Mr Speaker: (Standing up) What is this?

Stranger No. 1: This is a civil coup, hold tight, nobody move!

Mr Speaker: Yes?

Stranger No. 1: 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. (p. 18)

This is an extract from *Speight of Violence*, a book which recalls the memories of the 2000 coup as seen through



the eyes of three people—Dr Tupeni Baba, a Deputy Prime Minister in the hostage government, his wife Unaisi and journalist Michael Field.

Baba recalls how he ended by resigning from his post as a university professor to join politics and ended up being a hostage—twice (previously in 1987). He wrote on scraps of paper about happenings during his 56 days in captivity and these notes form a basis for the book.

Unaisi Nabobo Baba gives the readers the hostage families' point of view—especially the wives. She recalls how hard it was for her especially since she was pregnant. Field gives his view on the media and the

crisis reportage. He found much of the international media reported it as a 'Fijian vs. Indian' problem, when it was actually a power struggle between two of Fiji's leaders, Cakobau and Mara. He observes that overseas journalists knew little about Fiji and he gives an example of a *New Zealand Herald* reporter who was shocked it would take three hours to drive from Nadi to Suva and another who had read stories about the unrest in the Solomon Islands on his way to the Fiji coup. Without knowledge of the cultural system it would be hard to understand the politics.

Field also criticises the New Zealand media for taking little interest in Fiji before the coup. Covering the Pacific successfully needs 'long-time commitment, anything other than that would be patronising'.

He dismisses criticism that reporters were being unethical reporting from Parliament as journalists need to get as close to a story as they can (p. 176). However, he believes that after many of the reporters 'moved in' with the hostage-takers by eating and sleeping at Parliament, they started experiencing the Stockholm syndrome.

Speight was a testament to neatness, wearing an ironed *sulu* or wrap-around, topped with a pressed cotton island-style shirt or business shirt,

and often a tie. He left many reporters star-struck and he would flatter their egos in one of the oldest cons in the book: using each other's first name. For many, he quickly became 'George' and he would respond with first names in reply, creating solidarity and a media version of the Stockholm syndrome. (p. 175)

Fiji has had three coups yet the local media keep making similar mistakes over and over again. Why? Because many experienced journalists who covered the first coup in 1987 have moved on to other careers. So there is a lack of institutional knowledge to guide journalists on how to report during a crisis. Fiji's good journalists leave the country for better opportunities and better pay.

An unfortunate omission from this book is the critical role played by non-government organisations in support of human rights and the Constitution. There is little analysis of how they stood up for justice and campaigned for the coupsters to be prosecuted. But overall *Speight of Violence* is a good combination of the personal accounts by a hostage and his wife, and a perspective on media coverage of the coup from the eyes of a prominent South Pacific journalist.—CHRISTINE GOUNDER, a *NiuFM* reporter who covered the coup for Wansolwara.