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## INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES

### VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Sitiveni Rabuka

Key:

**SO:** Dr Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

**SR:** Sitiveni Rabuka (Respondent)

**SO:** This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Mr Sitiveni Rabuka in Suva on Thursday, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014. Sir, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to take part in this oral history project. I wonder if you could begin, please, by reflecting on your view of the Commonwealth, and the importance of the Commonwealth in the events of 1987 [i.e. the 14 May 1987 coup against Prime Minister Timoci Bavadra].

**SR:** Thank you very much, Sue. In 1987, you probably know the truth behind it. I was told, "The only way to change the situation now is to throw this constitution out of the window." These were the words of Sir Ratu Mara.

**SO:** You were playing golf with Ratu Mara at this particular occasion.

**SR:** Yes. I caught up with him – they were in a group. I had made arrangements to meet with him. I got there late and when I caught up with them on the sixth tee, he said, "The only way to change the situation is to throw the constitution out of the window." Before the fourteenth tee there is a villa where we stopped and had lunch, and that was also the end of the golf game. After lunch, I wanted to make sure that international relations were okay with him. He assured me they were okay. I said, "I'm worried about the reaction from Australia, New Zealand, America and the United Kingdom." He said, "Leave those to me."

So, the Commonwealth came out hard in the wake of the letter that His Excellency the Governor General at the time wrote to Buckingham Palace, admitting that his position as Governor General was no longer tenable. The Palace acknowledged. The Palace didn't even ask him whether he would be able to re-exert his position as Commander in Chief and order me back to the barracks. So, when the reaction of the Commonwealth came out, I was surprised, but I also understood the position. It was the right position – the right stance to take – and I accepted it. But I was also committed to doing all I

could at the time to restore relationships. I know that, at that time, the Vancouver Summit was approaching and we had sent as our special envoy the former Prime Minister Ratu Mara to go and start negotiations. While he was out there, he sensed that I was getting close to breaking the tie with the Realm and declaring Fiji a republic. I think he sent some desperate messages to try and stop me from declaring Fiji a republic, because he was going to try and get to Vancouver and lobby in the corridors of [the] Vancouver CHOGM.

I didn't get the message from him in time. By the time I got it, it was too late and Ratu Sir Penaia had already written to say that his position was no longer tenable and offered his resignation as Her Majesty's representative in Fiji.

*[Editor's Note: Fiji was declared a Republic on 7 October 1987. The Vancouver CHOGM was convened on 13 October 1987. Ratu Sir Penaia resigned on 15 October 1987.]*

So, that is the Realm part of it. The Commonwealth is quite distinctly different from the Realm. The Commonwealth decided to deal with it as the Commonwealth 'club' and suspended us all. [Fiji was required to re-apply for membership of the Commonwealth following the Vancouver CHOGM]. I was committed to restoring the relationship. The process was not completed until July 1997, when we had restructured our Constitution and I was admitted back. I was invited to attend the CHOGM in Edinburgh and I went to that with my Leader of the Opposition, Adi Litia Cakobau, the great-granddaughter of the Chief that ceded Fiji to Great Britain in 1874, Ratu Seru Cakobau. On the way up to Edinburgh, I had called on Her Majesty. I think they were doing some work at the Palace, so we met at Clarence House and it was there that I asked if she would like to become Queen of Fiji. She said very simply, "Let it be the will of the people." So, I offered a traditional apology – the presentation of a tabua [polished tooth of sperm whale] – and then, when we were talking, I asked her if she would agree for Fiji to approach her again to become our Queen. And she said, "Let it be the will of the people."

That, in a nutshell, is the progress from suspension to re-admission [in the Commonwealth], and from seceding from the Realm – if we can use that word – and trying to re-establish the Monarchy in the Fiji situation. The response from the Monarch at the time was, "Let it be the will of the people."

Since then – that was the 1997 CHOGM – we have not had any referendum or any further debate in parliament or out of parliament on whether we should re-establish our link with the Crown. It would be difficult to do that when we look at the composition of the population of Fiji at the time: there was a very strong Indo-Fijian component of the population. When you look at the Mahatma Gandhi revolution in India – where they wanted to have true independence, where the powers of the people of India were reposed in the people of India rather than reposed in the Crown of England – it would have been an uphill battle to try and convince the Indians in Fiji that we should go back into the Realm, because they had come out of the Realm. They had declared India a republic, and all the other republics at that time and before that time had broken away from a Monarchy and became republics where the people were the repository of the political authority in their own land. I didn't consider the 1987 coup as a movement for true independence and true political autonomy, where our destiny was determined by the people of Fiji full

stop. Although the Monarch was a ceremonial figure, it was still Her assent to the various legislative decisions [that mattered], which made it such that we were still under the authority of the Monarch of England.

**SO: Sir, I have a number of questions, starting with, as you said, the golf game at Pacific Harbour. Was Ratu Mara playing with political colleagues, a close cohort of people, or just with personal friends?**

SR: Only personal friends. They were not political. There was a businessman – a Samoan – and two other Samoans. One was the owner of the villa where we had the discussion, and one [was a] lawyer from Samoa. [Then there was] me and [another], a very close friend of Ratu Mara's.

*[Editor's Note: Ratu Mara has confirmed that he was playing golf with Rabuka and other colleagues in May 1987, but he denies that they had discussions on a possible military coup. See for instance, [the report in Asia Times, 22 March 2000](#)]*

**SO: You said that you asked a very important question about Fiji's international relations – that you were concerned about the attitude and reactions of Australia, New Zealand, the US and the UK. Did you leave that entirely to Ratu Mara? You said that he said, "Leave that to me." I just wondered if you, personally, had become involved in any way with the international diplomacy around this particular issue?**

SR: Never. Not at the time. I was just an ordinary soldier at the time.

**SO: So, after the events of 14<sup>th</sup> May 1987, you weren't aware of the discussions and contacts between the Palace and the Queen's advisors in London with Ratu Sir Penaia in Government House?**

SR: I was not aware of that, although that came out only in the writings of Sir Len Usher.

**SO: You noted that Ratu Mara went to Vancouver to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting to lobby privately. Was he accompanied by key advisors or was this a solo mission?**

SR: I think it was a solo mission. He might have gone with an aide, because at the time I'd given him the privilege of keeping a close aide. We provided him with secretarial assistance when he was here.

**SO: Ratu Mara later disclaimed any involvement in the military coup. Could you reflect on that? Do you think he was misremembering, or was this political expediency?**

SR: I cannot say, but he wanted to sue me after John Sharpham published my biography with the Central Queensland University Press. [John Sharpham, *Rabuka of Fiji: The Authorised Biography of Major-General Sitiveni Rabuka* (Central Queensland University Press, 2000)]

**SO: Yes, I've looked at that.**

SR: He tried to sue me, and the CQU Press lawyers and my lawyers said, “Okay, we’ll see him in court,” and he withdrew.

**SO: He withdrew the accusation?**

SR: Right.

**SO: It was a serious accusation, but this was a very serious matter.**

**You suggested that there was a groundswell of opinion within Fiji in September and October 1987 for Fiji to become a republic? Or was it that, once Ratu Penaia had submitted his resignation, this effectively became a *fait accompli* – he, as the Queen’s representative, had stepped down?**

SR: Yes.

**SO: But she still had it within her remit to appoint an alternative Governor General?**

SR: Correct. She could have, and she could have exerted her authority: “You are my representative there. That is the role of Fiji’s military forces, the members of whom owe allegiance to Her Majesty, [and her] heirs and successors.” If they had tried that, I don’t know how I would have handled it. I might have just surrendered to the Palace, saying, “OK, bad exercise.”

**SO: So, while all this was going on, were there other private representations being made to you from the Commonwealth, from the British military, from the British High Commissioner here? I’m just wondering about the process of contact that went on in any type of political challenge such as this.**

SR: Only the High Commissioner met me – straight after that, after ten o’clock. And he said, “You know what you’re doing is wrong?” I said, “Yes.” “Are you not prepared to reconsider?” I said, “No.” I was quite strong in my responses to his questions, because I knew Ratu Mara was involved, and I assumed that he would be doing the international relations thing.

**SO: Ratu Mara was certainly extremely well connected, and very highly regarded. So, after the resignation of Ratu Sir Penaia as Governor General on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1987 [he was appointed President of Fiji on 8<sup>th</sup> December] and before the whole discussion of the Commonwealth ‘club’ at Vancouver, were you the recipient of approaches from the Commonwealth, from Australia, from New Zealand, after Ratu Penaia’s resignation as Governor General? Once Fiji’s membership of the Commonwealth ‘lapsed’ at Vancouver, what was the process of re-engagement? How did the discreet diplomatic courtship continue?**

SR: No. [There was] none at all.

**SO: Okay. How about Australia and New Zealand within the South Pacific Forum arrangement?**

SR: We were not in the Forum. They kicked us out of the Forum at the time. When we were admitted, we had started sending in our interim government and I was only a Cabinet Minister at that time. Ratu Mara was the Interim Prime Minister and the Forum very quickly accepted the status of things at that time. Dr Bavadra and his group were kept out. They were not even in the corridors. He tried to lobby for support in the Pacific at the time.

**SO: Did you or your colleagues consider having a referendum on whether Fiji should become a republic? You said that there was no discussion in Parliament, but was there private discussion on this?**

SR: No, there was no discussion in Parliament, but the legal advisors at the time said, "The only way to go now is to go all the way to being a republic, because you have sacked Her Majesty the Queen. If she comes back, then you are all liable for treason against Her Majesty." So, the only way to put an end to that is to just say, "This is no longer Her Majesty's Government. It's no longer Her Majesty's territory of Fiji. It is now a republic."

**SO: So, as you say, the military forces then swore allegiance to the Republic of Fiji, because otherwise they would be in a treasonable position.**

SR: Correct. So, we changed it. The Court of the Republic of Fiji arrived and Her Majesty's Chief Justice and [other royal titles] – all those things had to be cleaned up. The only way to really have it clean was to have complete severance of any ties with Her Majesty's authority.

**SO: So, between this particular point in 1987 and your description of July 1997, when Fiji was included back in the Commonwealth and after your meeting with Her Majesty at Clarence House on your way to the Edinburgh CHOGM, which international relationships became of key importance to Fiji in this particular time? Fiji was expelled from the Commonwealth, and this was a time when Fiji's trade in the region – the South East Asian region – and with the European Union started to assume far greater significance than those trade relations with a Commonwealth dimension.**

SR: Yes, we started to 'Look North' and started looking at alternatives to our traditional trading partners and aid partners. So, the Commonwealth hold on Fiji became less, although we had bilateral agreements with Australia and New Zealand. We had the South Pacific area trade agreements, SPARTECA [South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement], and we developed those. I think people at that time were more pragmatic and did alright: "We don't like your politics, but we like your products so we'll keep trading and we want you to buy ours." So, we were a significant importer of Australian goods and New Zealand foods. We were totally dependent on imported fuel, so we had to have trade. I think it was in their best interests to develop new relationships. But when Bainimarama came in in 2006, we leaned more on China and more on Asia. India came back in and has given us some support, we think – we would like to believe. And we find ourselves now in a very bad debt situation.

But going back to Fiji's suspension from the councils of the Commonwealth, I think the time now is for the Commonwealth to rethink its 'club membership'

rule. Rather than having uniform political values, you just have the common history as a basis and continue to try and influence the members in the area of good governance, rather than breaking off all relationships altogether. It would be better to try and get in there and talk to them, rather than putting the world down.

**SO: This was the original argument of Secretary General Chief Emeka Anyaoku with the establishment at the Harare Declaration in 1991: to try to influence and encourage members on issues of good governance. The creation of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group and the expansion of its remit since 1995 have added to this. But you feel there should be a shift back to a voluntary association of states with a shared history and shared political linkages, supporting and recognising diversity?**

SR: Well, we should continue to recognise our diversity on good governance and values and things like that. We should not sever our ties; we should continue to try and improve, instead of cutting off somebody. Work with them, go forward with them, cooperate with them, [and] try and get them out of the situation they are in. Unfortunately, my coup and the current situation we're in are different. Mine was linked to a political party – the Alliance Party of Ratu Mara – and the Fijian people. This one is purely military. So, I was not the Commander [in 1987].

**SO: You were not the Commander of your coups in 1987?**

SR: No. I cannot claim that I took the Army.

**SO: How did you see your position then?**

SR: I was number three in the Army, and I took a group of people to capture the government.

**SO: But your superiors – the number one and number two in the Fijian Army – did you have political discussion with them? Or was this an autonomous action by you and middle-ranking officers?**

SR: Jim Sandy, the Chief of Staff, knew something would happen. He told me, his own words were, "Either you or the Commander have got to do this. I can't do it: I'm *kai loma*, I'm a white European." And I didn't say yes or no. I just said, "No, either you or the Commander [Ratu Epeli Nailatikau]. He's got to do it. He is the Commander." At that time, the Commander was going to go to Australia. After that discussion, nothing else took place. I quietly started doing what I was doing and training the people to be used, making sure we had enough ammunition in case we had to ward off any military counter-moves from Australia and New Zealand.

**SO: Were you expecting that?**

SR: No, I was not, but I just wanted to make sure that we were equipped. If they were going to evacuate their own citizens, there was a risk of some people being over-exuberant in the execution of their duties or in the execution of the defence, which could very easily turn into an ugly confrontation of military

personnel. At the time, we had almost no ammunition. I had to make sure that fresh supply was here in time for that. So, I got in touch with the agent who was selling ammunition to Fiji to see if we could buy from Singapore. We bought some ammunition from Singapore, put [it] on a naval boat which was not yet...

**SO: Excuse me, Sir, were these contacts with the Singapore military? Or was this a private arrangement?**

SR: No, a private agent came to us and took orders for ammunition from the suppliers.

**SO: So, you were putting contingency plans in place?**

SR: Yes.

**SO: Were you concerned particularly about an Indian response? An international Indian response?**

SR: Yes, I was, but I was also aware [of] the Indian design in Fiji. They wanted me to be Commander in 1980, 1981. I was interviewed by [the-then] Indian High Commissioner to Fiji, and she was trying to push strongly for me to become the Commander because I would sympathise with the Indian design in the Pacific, being Indian-trained. I'm a graduate of the Indian Staff College and at that time I was the only one that had a university degree. I had been given an award by the University of Madras as part of the Defence Services Staff College course.

**SO: So, this was part of an Indian approach to the Pacific region – offering trade and training?**

SR: Yes, and shore bases. They were looking for shore bases, because they couldn't get a foothold in Perth in Western Australia. They thought it would be a better opportunity to hop over Australia and get something in Fiji that would isolate Australia and New Zealand, and effectively put India into the Pacific.

**SO: Did this particular approach in 1980-81 surprise you?**

SR: It didn't even rub my ego. I was always bent on making the Army my professional career. I understood the leadership succession plans that might have been existing at the time, although I was not happy with Ratu Epeli Nailatikau coming back from the Fijian civil service into the Army and pushing everybody down in the promotion list.

**SO: So, fast forward to 1987, against this background of the Indian High Commissioner's approach and your training at the Indian Staff College, you had a particular perception of an Indian presence in the Pacific and the political developments here in Fiji with the May 1987 election. Were you concerned about potential elements within the Indian Government or in the Indian Army intervening in this situation?**

SR: I knew it could happen, but it would be very small scale, small cells, and more on the psychological side. They would try and convert us, psychologically. I

expected that to happen, but if Australia and New Zealand were still there, it would be difficult for them logistically to come into the Pacific. So, Australia and New Zealand were both a threat and an obstacle for a bigger threat.

**SO: So, Australia and New Zealand would potentially pressure you, but they were also a barrier, as you conceived it?**

SR: That's right.

**SO: I have heard that there were rumours of arm shipments going into Lautoka at this particular point.**

SR: Yes, that was later – about 1989-90 – when there was a shipment that finally got to Lautoka and there were others which were not spotted. However, they were on the Australian radar and the information came through Australia which enabled us to go and look [for the shipment]. We found some dilapidated arms and ammunition on some Muslim farms in the west.

**SO: How far did you attribute these particular incidents to Indian concern about Sri Lanka? Did you put it in a wider Indian context?**

SR: I'm playing golf on Saturday with TP Sreenivasan. who was Indian High Commissioner to Fiji at the time, so I'm going to ask him whether there was really a fundraising effort in India House to pay for this shipment which Kahan sent. Kahan was the Fiji citizen who ran away when his pyramid scheme was uncovered. He ran away and lived in England. Yes, he's the one that was supposed to have been collecting money from [Adnan] Khashoggi and company, and secured some sources. But then, I am aware of what international arms agents do. They would have got rubbish arms and ammunition which they would not have even checked, and the people would have gotten the money and run, knowing that their buyers were buying rubbish. And the buyers would be selling on that stuff to their rebel leaders, wherever they are. It's the same whether it's the Sandinistas, whether it's Central Africa or the Pacific; it would be the same. The people would end up with dilapidated arms and ammunition and probably lose one in ten for bad ammunition backfiring and blowing your eyes out.

**SO: So, it was more of a political gesture than a shipment that would lead to the radical overthrow of a government...**

SR: Yes.

**SO: After Fiji had been expelled from the councils of the Commonwealth, how far did you push to repair the rupture?**

SR: I didn't.

**SO: What of Fiji's relationship with Australia and New Zealand, though? Precisely because of your perception of the barrier they provided against Indian influence in the Pacific...**

SR: We were still under the 1990 constitution, which people didn't like. After the election, the very first Foreign Ministers meeting was held in Honiara. That



was where I met Paul Keating. But although it was based on a bad constitution according to international assessments, it was the will of the people. People were back in Parliament, representing people, so Keating immediately invited me for a state visit to Australia and that was the restoration of that. That was 1992. So, from 1987 to 1992, there was no direct contact, although we had exchanges [between] our diplomats. They were called Ambassadors rather than High Commissioners until we were restored to the Commonwealth. Then we had High Commissioners.

**SO: How badly was Fiji affected by the severance of international aid following expulsion from the Commonwealth?**

SR: We did have to readjust. We had to be very prudent about our fiscal and financial management. It was a very good time for us because we were very prudent in our management of debt and in our budget. Although we were not answerable to the people, we knew where we were going. We knew if we were not elected in the next election, we would be there paying the tax, as taxpayers.

**SO: So, it was a question of getting your macroeconomic policies right? Your foreign exchange earnings came principally from tourism, the key sector for Fiji's economy, because sugar had started to diminish dramatically by this particular point.**

SR: Yes. At that time the Sugar Land Tenancy Agreement was up for review anyway. [It was] up for closure because there was no renewal clause in any of the acts that governed the Landlord and Tenant Agreement.

**SO: How much did Ratu Mara stay involved in politics, despite having formally stepped down as interim Prime Minister?**

SR: Internationally, he didn't play a very active role. I think he lost his Privy Council membership – whether they do [lose it] or they're just not invited back to the club, I don't know which is the case. But he was hurt by the sudden rise to prominence of an unknown soldier. When his choice for Prime Minister in the 1992 election did not become Prime Minister, he had become my number one political obstacle. He worked with the other political parties and tried to spread his influence so that I could be ousted. He supported his daughter's candidacy with the Methodist-based Christian party in 1999.

**SO: Adi Koila Nailatikau?**

SR: Adi Koila, yes. And that split the Fijian vote. That cost us very dearly. We only won eight of the seats. My coalition partner – they were not a coalition partner at the time – but the National Federation Party was demolished. It didn't get one single seat.

**SO: Was the intensity of political debate and political infighting affecting Fiji's foreign relations?**

SR: Yes, because most of the leaders at the time were still friends of the Alliance Party and they wanted Ratu Mara and the post-coup plan to be the national plan of Fiji. The new leadership came up with me and the other politicians and

subordinates in the Alliance government took on a new direction. I think they were not very comfortable. I think his biggest hurdle came when Dr Mahathir openly supported me.

**SO: I was just thinking that, given Ratu Mara's standing as a leading Commonwealth spokesperson for the Pacific from 1970 onwards into the 1980s, he would have had extraordinarily good personal links with other Commonwealth leaders.**

SR: But he could have used that. He could have volunteered to use that contact, but he didn't. From 1987 to 1992, I think he played on that and got a lot of things going because of his personal rapport with the international leaders. So, I must give him credit for our passage from coup to election: 1987 to 1992. It was after the election that I think he wanted to re-exert his brand of leadership into the new Republic of Fiji. That was what resulted – whether he worked for it or not – but it resulted in the split among the Fijian vote.

**SO: In terms of legal advice for the new Fiji constitution in the 1990s, did you draw entirely on Fiji legal opinion or did you go outside?**

SR: We got Professor Bloustein of the University of New Jersey who came and worked with the report that was brought together by the Sir John Falvey [Constitutional Review] Committee, and after that it was refined. He did some work on it and [Paul] Manuelli went around and refined that. That became the base for the 1990 constitution.

**SO: Was Ratu Mara supportive of this political process for constitution building?**

SR: No, he was just.... While he was head of the Cabinet as Prime Minister; he put those things in place, yes.

**SO: So, in the 1990s, Fiji's foreign relations drive was 'Look North'. From what you have said, it seems the Commonwealth hold was diminishing. You emphasise particularly the South Pacific angle. How important was the goal of readmission into the Councils of the Commonwealth for your government? Or was this in fact very low down the list of priorities?**

SR: It was low down. For us, the restoration of relationships with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Asia were more important – for me, at the time, as Prime Minister. Even during the coup era, from 1987 to 1992, as a Cabinet member, I was more concerned with the immediate area of interest rather than the wider Commonwealth interest.

**SO: Sir, on the events of George Speight's coup in 2000, were you in any way consulted or engaged by outside Commonwealth observers? Fiji had, after all, been readmitted to the Commonwealth in 1997.**

SR: No, there was none, although at that time I was working as the special envoy for peace in the Solomons. Chief Anyaoku had put me there and my deputy was Dr Ade Adefuye, a Nigerian. We worked together in the Solomons. While we were still continuing our work, the 2000 coup happened. I don't know whether the Commonwealth Secretariat was wrongly informed or deliberately

wrongly informed that I might have been involved. I was not invited to go back [to the Solomons] after that, but already we had laid down the ground rules. We had negotiated the ceasefire and the negotiations for peace which formed the basis for ongoing work that resulted in RAMSI, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, in 2003.

**SO: Sir, please, could I ask you how you came to be Chief Anyaoku's special envoy?**

SR: I was asked when my party lost the election. I won my seat, with the biggest number of votes in the whole election, but two members of my own party – the Fiji Political Party, also known as the SVT, *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* – came to me and said, “You have to take personal responsibility for this and resign as party leader,” and I said, “Okay”. So, I resigned as party leader, and one of them became party leader and Leader of the Opposition. I was Chairman of the Provincial Council and Chairman of the Council of Chiefs when our High Commissioner in London called to say that the Commonwealth Secretariat would like to offer me this job as a special envoy. There was no pay in it. I said, “Okay, that's fine,” but when I went to the Solomons I had some problems because the people of Malaita saw me as a nationalist. The problems in Guadalcanal at the time – in Honiara, particularly – was between the indigenous people of Honiara and Guadalcanal, and the outsiders from Malaita. The Malaitans were stronger and they were in government in most of the top positions. They probably saw me as naturally favouring the indigenous Guadalcanali people.

**SO: How much prior briefing did you have before you went to Honiara?**

SR: I didn't have any briefing. I went there and tried to find out what was happening.

**SO: So, that's where you met Dr Adefuye from the Secretariat? How well was Dr Adefuye briefed?**

SR: He was informed about the basic issues. We had a discussion and I said, “Well, in that case, let's go.” He said, “Where?” “We are going to see the rebels.” He panicked. Our contact was the Roman Catholic Archbishop who took us to the end of the civilised route.

**SO: The end of the paved road?**

SR: Well, not just the paved road, [but] to where they had the police influence. After that, it was 'no law' territory. So, we went in and we had to walk back out to our little Suzuki. We went in and suddenly they just came out of the trees and over the ground. They stood there with their carbines from the Second World War that were left behind by the British forces. I knew they wouldn't fire; I knew they didn't have any ammunition. If they had the right ammunition, they wouldn't be able to go into the bore because they were all rusty.

**SO: Dr Adefuye didn't know that! [Laughter]**

SR: No, he was very, very scared. I felt sorry for him. [The rebels] came up. I had with me a bundle of kava. When they came, I told Ade, “Sit down.” So, we all

sat down and I presented the kava in Fijian. There was somebody there who received it in English and pidgin, and then after that they brought in a big pile of betel nut and made the reciprocal presentation. So, we started talking. That was it. I did a Fijian custom; they did their own custom.

**SO: Yes, but you were able to communicate enough.**

SR: Yes, in English. Most of them spoke English well enough. Even their pidgin we could follow, but they spoke to us in English.

**SO: So, there was enough of a hierarchy there – it was not a rabble militia, there was somebody that you could negotiate with?**

SR: Yes, the leaders were university-trained: University of the South Pacific (USP) trained and Fulton College trained. Both had trained in Fiji. That was the beginning. I went then to the rebel stronghold; I also went to Malaita and spoke to them, and then called them both together to Central Province, another neutral island where they all came for a discussion. Then we drew up the Peace Accord.

**SO: So, this was very much personal negotiations by yourself and Dr Adefuye? Communication with Chief Anyaoku at Marlborough House would have been non-existent.**

SR: No, that's right, but there was the Commonwealth Youth Programme. We used the Youth Programme as our base office and used their communications and secretarial support. But we did a lot of the work. Adefuye must take a lot of credit because he just persisted and he didn't know the Pacific. I knew the Pacific. He was surprised there was no similarity in the African – particularly Nigerian – way of doing things. But he recognised the custom side of it. He recognised the tribal and custom side.

**SO: So, a wider Melanesian world?**

SR: Yes.

**SO: Also, you had been a military commander who had become a democrat yourself: an elected Prime Minister. So, you had a unique authority to discuss with these people who were trying to use military force to achieve political goals.**

SR: They also knew me, as they called me 'General'. In fact, one baby was born when I was there and his first name is 'General' [and] second name is 'Rabuka'. [Laughter] When my cousin went back to the Solomons last month, I said, "Hey, go to this village...!"

**SO: "Ask for my yaca [namesake]!" [Laughter]**

SR: Yeah, "My yaca is there." "What's his name?" "General." "That's not your name!" "Well, that's his name. He is my yaca."

**SO: So, how long was this Special Envoy trip?**

SR: From 1999 to 2000 – to the coup. About a year. We just went there and Ade would say, “Okay, see you in Honiara next week.” Okay, go back, and we’d continue. He’d go back with our findings and our drafts to the Secretariat and then come back.

**SO: So, you were based in Honiara for a year?**

SR: Yes.

**SO: Sir, did you get credit for this? This was an important Peace Accord that you were...**

SR: I think they tried to down play it. Straight after that, the Labour government was in power here. They didn’t even acknowledge any of the things I was doing. I wasn’t even allowed to use the VIP lounge in the airport! Not that I missed it... I was comfortable just talking to the public in the public lounges.

**SO: But this was Fiji contributing to international peace and conflict mediation.**

SR: Yes.

**SO: Sir, after the events of 2000, Fiji was again suspended from the Commonwealth – in 2006, following the coup led by Frank Bainimarama.**

SR: No, 2006 was different: after 2000, there was no suspension.

**SO: No, but there was another coup in 2006.**

SR: There was another one in 2006, which was the only military coup we have had because the Commander had said to the government, “We don’t like what you’re doing. If you don’t change, we will take over.” Which he did, and that was a military coup. In our case, it was just a group of soldiers and me, and then I spoke to the Army that day and said, “We have done this. Anybody who doesn’t agree is prepared to leave. I have now replaced the Commander; I’ve taken over as Commander.” There were two coups: one against the Commander and one against the government. I first had to claim and then get myself accepted as the Commander of the military. The soldiers, they all came back – apart from four who had to take some leave. We gave them leave; one of them asked for an extension of leave to deal with his own conscience, and then came back. I gave them the choice: “Either follow your conscience and your oath of allegiance. If you cannot handle this, you’re free to leave.” But only four left for a while and then came back. Then I was installed by them as Commander.

**SO: Sir, I’ve done research into the role of the Army and the security services in Zimbabwe and the extent to which that they became politicised, particularly from 1999-2000. How far do you think that there’s been a comparable process of politicisation of the Army – and a core group within the Army – in Fiji politics now?**

SR: Yes, from 2006 I think we became very, very politicised. It was then [that] the political aspirations of our current Prime Minister.... Because he said, “You’re

not running Fiji politics properly. We're going to do it right." So, they took over from Laisenia Qarase in 2006, and because he had a design – the proper design for the governance of Fiji, not the one that was being followed by the elected government – he now wants to run so that he can continue his programme. That's why he's running for this election.

**SO: But he's formed a political party, Fiji First, and he's taking part in the September general election.**

SR: He's looking for support now.

**SO: I read the reports in this morning's paper. But isn't there a potential problem if there has been a politicisation within the medium ranks of the security forces? If they use military means to 'correct' the democratic process? Is that habit forming?**

SR: Yes.

**SO: So, it may be difficult to get the troops to stay in the barracks?**

SR: That's right. Our only opportunity now is to convince the current leader that, "You are the one that can stop this. You stand firm and tell the politicians, 'Go to hell', if they come back to you. You're going to sort it out in Parliament. 'I'm not going to support any of you or you – opposition or government or anybody else. We're going to do our duty. We are going to support the police in law and order breakdown.'"

**SO: Have you been contacted by any people from the Melanesian Spearhead Group, from the Pacific Island Forum, for your insights or for your contribution to make sure the democratic process is indeed followed in these elections?**

SR: No.

**SO: Sir, you've continued to take an active role in politics?**

SR: I'm standing for election, but nobody has come to me to ask for my views. If they had come, I wouldn't have tried to go back. I would have tried to solve or contribute to the solving of our political problems from outside Parliament, because I've not been asked to do that. I'm going to Parliament and [will] work inside Parliament as a representative of the people.

**SO: Sir, can I ask you about Fiji's current international relations? Australia and New Zealand are still particularly important as significant members within the Pacific region...**

SR: The current leadership would like to say no, but that is wrong. They will remain important players in this part of the world.

**SO: What of China?**

SR: China is getting very big, but who are the Lapita people? [Laughter] People think that this is newly emerging – China from Asia. But the Lapita people,

who were here before the Melanesians arrived, were very much Asiatic. When people dig up old sites and you look at the discoveries, they find skeletons of people who are not Melanesians; [they are] not like me. They are more like Chin Peng or somebody. I will send you the address I made to the Otago University in Dunedin.

**SO: So, they think the first settlers in Fiji were the Lapita people?**

SR: Yes. They were small; they were more like Micronesians and Asians. The indigenous Asians, indigenous Chinese... Some tribes remain in Taiwan.

**SO: Sir, please could I ask you about the contemporary relationship between Fiji, the People's Republic of China, and with Taiwan. I know it has been controversial.**

SR: Yes.

**SO: As China follows a 'One China' policy, if Fiji was trying to push forward its relations with Taipei, that would be problematic for your relationship with Beijing.**

SR: Yes, well, we have diplomatic relations with Beijing and we have a people-to-people relationship or technical relationship with the Republic of China on Taiwan. During my time, we managed to keep that going well. In our official visits, we would go to Japan and then China, and then go to Malaysia and then Taiwan. As long as you're not travelling directly from China to Taiwan or Taiwan to China: you need to have another intermediate port.

**SO: Sir, I know that your embassy in Beijing is your largest overseas mission. Fiji only has two people in London, and you've got twenty in Beijing. It has been said that China's particular investment in Fiji also helps to remove any international encouragement or international pressure for democratisation. Would you say that's a fair comment, or not?**

SR: That's a fair comment, but those who are encouraging that or going along with it don't realise it. China's main interest is China.

**SO: Yes, it is indeed. Beijing's policy is hard-headed and pragmatic. So, do you think that the lack of conditionalities in Chinese investment has been slowing down the democratisation process?**

SR: Yes, it has. It has slowed down the democratisation programme and progress because we said, "To hell with democracy, we are doing well. We're doing well with our new friends." So, it has probably been the biggest agent for the slow progress.

**SO: But if there is an American competition with China, pushing FDI...**

SR: It's still the same.

**SO: Okay, so there seems to be geo-strategic contestation between China and the USA over Fiji, but you are saying the policy and actions of both, in fact, undercut democratisation?**

SR: Yes. And we still overplay our self-image. We think that we're too important.

**SO: When I lived here in Fiji in the late 1970s, it was regarded – and saw itself – as ‘the hub of the Pacific’!**

SR: *[Laughter]* Well, the time will come when people will say, “Okay, do your own thing, we'll do our own thing and we'll see how far we can go.”

**SO: Where is most of your fuel coming from now?**

SR: Through Australia.

**SO: Is that a strategic pinch point for you, because it makes Fiji susceptible to Australian political pressure for democratization?**

SR: No, because we can source fuel elsewhere. The fuel companies buy their [fuel] from anywhere, and they will continue to do that. So, it doesn't have to come through Australia. It could come through Asia, Papua New Guinea... Papua New Guinea can be the staging port for trade.

**SO: Sir, going forward, how much importance would you attach to Fiji being welcomed back into the Commonwealth?**

SR: Not at the moment. I think it's no longer a very significant victory. Although, I'm part of the Fiji Amateur Sports Organisation and National Olympic Committee (FASONOC) and being allowed to participate in the next Commonwealth Games is a good thing for our sports people. But our readmission into the Commonwealth? The people will like and will enjoy it, but the government will not treat it as a big deal. But it is important, because of the moral and cultural interaction we will have with people of similar histories.

**SO: How important are these sporting links for keeping the idea of a Commonwealth alive for Fiji? In terms of rugby and participation in the Commonwealth Games?**

SR: They are important [for] the promotion of sports. It's a very credible international competition where we can really say, “Okay, we're going to go to the Commonwealth Games.” Now, we have a gold in the Pacific Games: so what? You look at the times of our gold medallists: “You wouldn't have qualified for the Commonwealth, and you are our best athletes?” So, the Commonwealth Games are a step-up for the sports people of Fiji. If you want to play there, then you have to improve your facilities and improve the technical knowledge in Fiji. So, you expand it from the track to the technical people – coaching, the high performance unit technicians who come. At the moment, they're mostly from England and Australia.

**SO: You had mentioned the Commonwealth Youth Programme being very important to support your special envoy position in the Solomon Islands. How much do you think that the young people of Fiji connect**



**with the idea of the Commonwealth of Peoples? The Commonwealth has changed from its inter-governmental aspect in 1987 to a very different entity now.**

SR: Yes. I don't think they really understand how important it is. The significance or the importance [of the Commonwealth] really is diminishing; the longer the isolation [of Fiji], the more difficult the restoration. I've said that many times before. While we are kept behind this wall of restrictions, our young people have developed their own perception of the international youth community. Now you go to our university [and] you're internationally marketable: you can go and work anywhere. The border controls are not as strict, unless you are carrying weapons, narcotics and things like that. If you have a clean record, you can go anywhere. If you have a good academic record, you can work anywhere. The old Youth Programme for the Commonwealth – the old Colombo Plan and things – are no longer as applicable now as they were at the time.

**SO: Are there civil society organisations from the Commonwealth which are active here, that you know of?**

SR: They are no longer known as 'Commonwealth' civil society organisations, but they're mostly England-based or Australia-based, the civil society groups that are here, yes. They are Commonwealth-country based.

**SO: Sir, how far do you think the Queen has been critical to the survival of the Commonwealth?**

SR: I think very, very, very critical. A lot of people don't care so much about the Commonwealth as they do about Her Majesty. I think [that] if we have a new monarch who wasn't there with our fathers during the War, then I think the significance will very quickly diminish.

**SO: Sir, thank you very much indeed for answering my questions.**

[END OF AUDIOFILE]