

Assessment of the Commander's performance since the 2000 coup

This report is a response to Commodore Bainimarama's request that his performances as Commander of the RFMF since the 2000 coup be assessed. It is not an easy task but for the good of Fiji as a whole this is a move on the right direction.

I have decided to assess the Commodore's performances under certain criteria. These may throw light on what I will term as successes or failures on the Commander's part. Warren Bennis writes: "It is not enough for a leader to do things right; he must do the right thing."

Criteria for assessment:

1. Guiding Vision
2. Ethic of Choice
3. Character
4. Respect for Human Rights

1. Guiding Vision

The guiding vision for the military is undoubtedly a task of the Government since the army is under the authority of a Civilian Government. The objectives and tasks of the military were clear since its beginning but the coups of 1987 corrupted the public image of the military force and the public began to question the objectives and tasks of such a highly disciplined institution.

Since 1987 the military worked tirelessly to regain the confidence of the public and its attempt was a great success. Rabuka's successor, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, spearheaded that road to recovery of the RFMF's image. At the end of his term in office Commodore F. Bainimarama was appointed to be the man on the wheel.

The public started to see the army as an institution worthy of their trust. The Commodore carried out a vision of the RFMF as an institution worthy of people's trust. Unfortunately that public image was tarnished again when members of the military helped stage the civilian coup in May 2000.

The "civilian coup" raised doubts among the public regarding the role of the military as guardian of their national sense of security. The small group of men who stormed Parliament came from the CRW who answered directly to the Commander. It is logical to make a conclusion that ultimately the failure on the part of the military rests with the Commander for he was and still is the Commander of the RFMF. So much have been said about so and so but the public have not heard the Commander explaining to the public where he himself may have gone wrong in carrying out his office. The questions some sections of the public ask are:

Did the Commander know or suspect that a coup was imminent?

A lot of good things have been said and written about the performances of the Commander. There are a lot of questions to be answered and the daily newspapers continue to raise some of those questions. What is the guiding vision for the RFMF these

days? The answer is not clear to the public. It seems that what is happening now is not so much forward looking kind of attitude but an excessive preoccupation with inward looking and now disclosing the dirty laundry of the RFMF to the public. The court martial is doing that these days

After the release of the hostages the Commander was praised for his courage and decisiveness as well as his foresightedness. He had a clear vision that he was to guide Fiji safely through the narrow passages surrounded by threatening reefs to clear, deep water. One of the daily newspapers made him the Man of the Year and the Review of January 2001 made him the Achiever of the Year. The summary in the Review is worth looking at.

For someone who wasn't supposed to last on the job for more than a few months from when he was first appointed, Commodore F. Bainimarama proved extremely resistant to pressures. So much so that he emerged from a crisis that was supposed to deliver his death knell looking stronger, more assertive and more in control. Not only that, the man who critics said was weak leader presided over the military during its most testing, challenging and gut-wrenching time ever. Never before in its history had the armed forces faced such a serious challenge to its authority, unity and integrity. That both Bainimarama and the army withstood and survived the pressures is a credit to the man and the institution.

The article speaks of a man with vision and his ability to put flesh into that vision. He is being portrayed as a person who is very much in control. However, it is also interesting to note that at the last sentence it says: "...both Bainimarama and the army withstood and survived the pressures is a credit to the man and the institution."

This sentence implies that there are also great achievers in the institution who made sure that the institution withstood the testing time. This can cloud the credit given to the man at the helm. The leader will always need a team to carry out the vision and so due credit must also be given to the team. The Commodore symbolizes the achievement of all for as an authority figure he symbolizes unity.

The question on unity is another subject since the Commodore's attitude towards some of his top men indicate a lack of skill in diplomacy and fostering trust and relationships in a professional environment. That was shown in his inability to articulate with brevity and with charm his responses to questions posed to him by journalists. When he felt very uncomfortable with questions directed at him his facial expressions and tone of voice indicated anger and frustrations and at times his statements were rather undiplomatic.

Furthermore if unity was a vision for the RFMF never have the public experience a time of disunity among the force like the time of this Commander. The mutiny speaks clearly to that fact. When he escaped from the RFMF compound during the mutiny that image contradicts the fine words of the Review: "...stronger, more assertive and more in control." The RFMF camp is his turf and he is the man in charge. Some may feel for the man but in military terms one may raise the question: "When the ship sinks who should be the last person to leave the ship?" The natural reaction of a military commander when

the enemy attacks is to engage the enemy while leading his men during the firefight. If necessary he will order withdrawal and to regroup. But the Commander opted to escape and let his senior and junior officers lead the way and to engage the rebels. His first public appearance after his hasty escape was at the CWM Hospital. That was not where he should have been. He should have been at the RFMF camp engaging the rebels and to show that he was very much in control not only in the warmth of the office but also in the mud and discomfort of the battlefield. But again the senior officers directed the recapture of the RFMF camp but the credit went to the man in charge who was most ready to escape rather than being ready to engage the rebels both in combat and in negotiations. The question here is a question of competency.

2. Ethic of Choice

The Commander's decision to arrest the deteriorated situation of May 2000 from sliding into anarchy was a right choice. The people of Fiji breathed some fresh air and sigh of relief. They placed their hope once again on the RFMF.

However, the way the civilians at Kalabu and other parts of Fiji were arrested and treated created further bitter feelings and distrust of the military. But the mutiny of November 2000 indicated resentment against the Commander's leadership. It seemed that the CRW unit was promised that the unit was not going to be disbanded but at the end it was disbanded. That created ill feelings and sense of betrayal. The mutiny was directed at the top level. The moral authority of the Commander to lead and public confidence in his leadership were put into question mark. The exodus and whispers of more exodus of qualified leaders from the RFMF further deteriorated the public confidence in this institution. The fear is that the RFMF will end up led by officers who have not matured in the force over a longer period of time. I am not surprised that some members of the public are calling for the commander to resign. The Sunday Times letter to the editor by a Ratu Iliesa is an example.

The revelation of the murder of the soldiers who died during the mutiny does not help regain public confidence. The fact that some military officers spoke their mind to the media without revealing their identity indicates a rift among the leaders who surround the Commander.

3. Ethic of Character

There is no doubt that the Commander is a man with integrity and a principled person. He has shown in many ways the gifts and talents in the man he is. As President of the Fiji Rugby Union he is certainly committed. He is a family man.

However, some of his public appearances seem to reveal a man who may not be comfortable in dealing with conflicts. Sometimes his facial expression reveals his anger and frustration and such feelings may have come from his inability to deal with the situation as it unfolds in his eyes. Some of the responses given to journalists during press conferences are proofs of this character.

It is a sign of a person with strong sense of inner security to handle conflicts, live and work with people whose opinions are different from his or hers. It is his/her task to

accommodate for those differences and turn them into strengths for the institution rather than perceived as weaknesses and threats. John C. Maxwell writes: "You can't do it alone. If you really want to be a successful leader, you must develop leaders around you. You must establish a team. You must find a way to get your vision seen, implemented, and contributed to by others. The leader sees the big picture, but he needs other leaders to help his mental picture a reality ... The determination of a positive or negative outcome in my leadership depends upon my ability as a leader to develop those closest to me. It also depends upon my ability to recognize the value that others can give my organization and me."

The character of the man does not follow a consistent pattern. He is a fine man but does not seem to do justice to say that he is a fine soldier let alone a fine Commander. There is so much division within the army under his leadership. The men in the army may be holding the army together for their own benefit such as providing financial and material needs for their families. They may have a lot of differences but they may have common concern and interests to hold them together. It can be misleading to say then that the Commander is fostering the unity of the RFMF. A change of leadership may see the army men continue holding the camp together more for personal reasons.

The heavy bodyguards surrounding the Commodore speak of a man in charge who does not find security in winning the hearts of the men he is in charge of. He portrays an image of a man who does not really trust his own men. The image speaks of a presence of a strong opposition or enemies from within the force. Does the image encourage and foster trust in the force?

4. Human Rights

The RFMF is definitely not above the law nor above the universal call for the respect of the dignity and rights of the human persons. The human rights abuses during the coup, after the coup, during and after the mutiny raise a lot of questions regarding the discipline of the military. The arbitrary arrests of persons, the beatings of military men as well as civilians speak of an ill-discipline force. It is the task of the Commander that his men are highly trained not only in combat but also the observance of the rule of law and respect for human rights of individuals as well as groups.

It is encouraging that recently various workshops related to the respect to the rules of law, rules of engagement, and respect for human rights have been conducted for the men and women of RFMF.

Conclusion

After assessing the performances and character of the Commander of the RFMF I think it is fair to say that he is still very much in control of the military but he has been also the cause of many frictions in the force. He cannot transfer his ideas and vision to senior officers in ways that will call forth cooperation and unity. He must not fear his inability to deal with military matters of which his senior officers are more equipped to carry out. These officers are his resources to tap into and turn their experiences into strengths of the RFMF. It is obvious that a person trained over number of years to deal with Navy matters

find it problematic to change over and deal with military matters. There may be similarities but one cannot deny the shortcomings. The Commander needs to accept this fact and he must be ready to call on his senior officers to make up for his shortcomings. These highly trained men will feel their worth and appreciated for they have given a good part of their life to the development and pride of the RFMF.