

On My Mind

6/2/00

, to think of a neighboring Pacific island country under control of the military as is Fiji, at the moment. Though control by force, by threat of gunfire, is far too common in many other parts of the world, in recent times it has not come all that close to this part - it is so alien a thought, in fact, that it's almost beyond comprehension.

Allegedly, the military have taken control because the president of Fiji had no real power, and thus was in no position to deal with the rebel leader who had taken Fiji's prime minister hostage and declared himself in charge of the country.

For me, there is more at issue here than just unrest in a neighboring country. The uprising has cut almost all communications with members of the Greenpeace staff headquartered in Fiji - staff who recently visited Saipan and who have stayed in touch, assisting and advising efforts to resolve the PCB crisis in the village of Tanapag. I am concerned for their personal welfare.

<center>* * *</center>

The response to the Fiji coup by Joe Murphy, former editor of the <I>Pacific Daily News</I> who still writes a daily column for the <I>PDN</I>, is a little far-fetched. Fiji's prime minister was ousted because he is an Indian - member of a "non-indigenous," if you will, ethnic group in Fiji that represents almost 50% of the population. He had been in office only a year. In Tuesday's issue, Murphy raises the fear that a similar coup could occur in Guam in 10 or 20 years.

If the Filipinos ever became the majority, eventually elected a Filipino governor, "would some Chamorros armed with rifles begin taking hostages? Would they be justified in doing so? Even after a democratic election?" he asks.

Of course, it is impossible to predict the future. And we are all entitled to our own fantasies. But unless the U.S. military no longer has a presence there and/or Guam becomes independent and establishes its own military force, I hardly think a situation similar to that in Fiji could arise on Guam. That's got to be one of Joe's more nightmarish pipe dreams.

<center>* * *</center>

Yet there already exists a strain of such repressive and dictatorial-type behavior within the CNMI legislature. The micro-management of government agencies, particularly, at the moment, the Commonwealth Utilities Corporation, is but one example. It doesn't matter what the Board does or says, or consultants have recommended, or, presumably, even what staff may opine.

Members of the legislature have their own agenda, and despite a lack of in-depth knowledge or understanding, do not hesitate to impose their own positions on the agency.

Nor do they hesitate to foster their own self-interest. Of which their attitude towards the Department of Finance, toward the Secretary's attempt to promote integrity and responsibility in the

administration of the CNMI's limited budget, is obvious proof. Then there was the Speaker's unilateral and arbitrary decision - shamelessly unopposed by anyone else in the legislature - to oust the Washington Representative's office from its long-standing location in the legislative building. The mindless accusations being thrown at the Department of Interior's Office of Insular Affairs Field Representative Jeff Schorr are another example.

Where have all the oaths to uphold democracy, individual freedoms, the right to equal treatment gone? The legislature, and some elements of the media as well, would appear to be just as arbitrary, just as presumptuous, just as scornful of the law, as the rebel leaders in Fiji appear to be.

Should one be grateful that the weapon is money, and not guns? That at least the casualties aren't fatal?

<center>* * *</center>

Kumoi's decision to move his office from the lofty heights of Capitol Hill down to Saipan's flatlands to be closer to his constituents seems, at first glance, a rather radical tactic for protesting the fate of minority members of the legislature. Kumoi complained that there was nothing for him to do on Capitol Hill, since he was neither chairman nor vice-chairman of any committee, and none of the committees of which he was a member was holding meetings.

On second thought, though, perhaps his protest did not go far enough. Other than a blanket denial that the Senator's perceptions have any validity, there seems to have been no reaction by his fellow senators, nor is there any sign that anyone in the legislature has any intention of taking any action on his complaint.

Yet the treatment of minority members has long been a problem in both houses of the Legislature - as I'm sure more than a few of the present members would wholeheartedly agree. Regardless of their knowledge or experience or the number of times they have previously been elected to office, at present, minority members are, to all extents and purposes, ignored. They are given no responsibilities, no role to perform, no position to hold, no recognition. More than one highly qualified legislator has been lost to the CNMI because he or she has been unwilling to stay in office under such conditions.

That's a pity. What's more, it's a gross waste of money, of talent, of ability. Minority legislators are being paid, at the moment, to do not much more than warm a seat, cast an occasional vote, show up for occasional ceremonies. They are allowed to speak at sessions, but their input is often ignored. I suspect such bills as they may introduce are generally overlooked, never assigned to a committee, or placed on an agenda for discussion. The cost to the CNMI of such a system of rejection is considerable, and it is a loss the CNMI can ill afford.

In contrast, in the U.S. Congress, each house officially recognizes both a minority leader and a minority whip in addition to the majority leader and majority whip. Each committee, in addition to a chairman from the majority party, recognizes and lists a ranking member of the opposing party. Unlike what happens in the CNMI, the value and the role of dissenting parties is official,

and is officially sanctioned. While I am not an advocate of wholesale adoption of mainland ways, I do believe in taking advantage of adopting, adapting, those mainland ways that are appropriate and fitting.

Nor am I an advocate of wholesale adoption of some of Kumoi's other ploys and stratagems. But in this case, I do think he has a valid point. A serious re-examination of the role of minority legislators would benefit not only minority legislators, but all of the CNMI.

<center>* * *</center>

The <I>PDN</I> reports that snake traps being used at Anderson Air Force Base on Guam have caught 500 snakes in one month. Either they've got a far better trap than is being used here, or our snake population is very, very small - or could it be that Guam really is as heavily infested as some reports have said, with hundreds of snakes per square mile?