Sleepless in Suva
Government Standoff in Fiji

In Fiji, this time of the year is normally very good for tourism. Championship surfers gather to test their skills on the big waves near Tavarua, school semesters are ending in Australia and New Zealand, and families are looking forward to a tropical vacation in Fiji over the Christmas holidays. Hotels run near capacity, hotel workers have excellent job opportunities, and the government collects millions of dollars in tax revenues. Unfortunately this year, a standoff between various factions of government has many fearing there will be another attempt to overthrow the political leadership, which would shatter what is normally the peak visitor season. That fear is not without foundation because, since 1987, there have been three coups and a failed mutiny in this beautiful, multiethnic, multi-island nation.

According to various news reports, the standoff began when the popularly-elected government introduced three controversial bills in parliament.

- **The Qoliqoli legislation** that would transfer rights to commercially use the waters and seabeds surrounding the islands to private parties.
- **Another bill** aimed at identifying the traditional ownership of what is now freehold land. Some fear this will cloud the title on private property and perhaps lead to endless litigation as to whether compensation paid at the time of the original transfer was “fair.”
- **The Tolerance and Reconciliation bill** is probably the most controversial, as it would essentially be a “get out of jail free” ticket for George Speight and others now in prison for their involvement in the last attempt to overthrow the government, the Coup of 2000.

On one side is Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase who believes his election has given him a mandate to push through this legislation. Against him is the head of the Fiji military, Commodore Voreqe “Frank” Bainimarama, who is firm in his opposition to the Tolerance and Reconciliation bill. In between sits the Great Council of Chiefs, a 52-member body that plays a constitutional role in selecting the president and almost half of the Senate seats in parliament.

To me, it is interesting that the issues in Fiji are not unlike some of the issues we have tackled in Hawaii.

- **The Qoliqoli legislation** reminds me of Hawaii’s laws that give certain private property rights to the owners of shoreline fishponds.
- **The concept of questioning ownership of land** is still being resolved in Hawaii, with recent court decisions affirming certain gathering rights vested in Hawaiians who can prove lineage to original landowners, even though the land was sold many, many years ago.
- **The potential release of George Speight, et al., from prison** comes from the Fijian tradition of forgiveness by way of presentation and exchange of tabua—whale’s teeth—to the aggrieved party, in this case, the greater community. In Hawaii, a similar tradition exists. Called ho’oponopono, it has three elements—confession, apology, and forgiveness—which together lead to conflict resolution.

In the meantime, the uncertainty in Fiji has had a definite impact on overseas tourism. Occupancy at Outrigger on the Lagoon, Fiji will be about 60 percent this month and in the range of 70 percent during the next 60 days. Our popular companion property, Castaway Island Resort, located about 20 miles off Nadi, has not experienced any cancellations. However, at the larger hotels on Denarau Island, a few minutes’ drive from Nadi, which depend on the Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions markets (MICE), there have been reports of significant loss of business since the standoff began about a month ago.

At Outrigger on the Lagoon, Fiji, work on the beautiful hilltop spa continues and is expected to be completed during the first quarter of 2007. It will be a fantastic facility.

Let’s hope that by the time the spa is ready to open its doors, if not sooner, tabua will have been exchanged, and Fiji will continue to be a favorite destination for travelers from around the world.