Preface

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Fiji is one of the largest Pacific Island countries. With a per capita GNP in 1997 of US$2470 Fiji is classified by the World Bank as a lower-middle income developing country. Further, with an average life expectancy of 72 years, infant mortality of approximately 22 per thousand, and an adult literacy rate of 91 per cent, Fiji has a high level of social development, being ranked number 46 in the United Nations Development Programme’s 1997 human development index. However, despite what has been in regional and comparative terms a reasonably enviable record of ‘development’, Fiji has not been at peace with itself. In common with countries as diverse as Scotland, Canada, Belgium, South Africa, Rwanda, Burundi and Bosnia–Herzegovina, Fiji has witnessed, over the post-independence period, the increasing politicisation of identity. More specifically, in Fiji social dissent and conflict commonly use the identity politics of ethnicity. As a direct consequence, in 1987 the seeming tranquility of Fiji was shattered by two military coups—the first in the South Pacific region.

Since the coups there have been dramatic changes in Fiji’s society, politics and economy. The period has witnessed four governments: an unelected, military-backed Interim Government between 1987 and 1992; two governments elected under the 1990 Constitution and led by Sitiveni Rabuka, the leader of the 1987 coups; and the government elected in 1999 under the provisions of the 1997 Constitution and led by the Fiji Labour Party (FLP). Fiji’s governments between 1987 and 1998 altered the structure of the economy, primarily by encouraging the production of garments in tax-free factories and by seeking to integrate Fiji increasingly into the global economy through a reduction in trade barriers. At the same time the labour force has changed: the feminisation of the waged labour force has occurred with the expansion of the garment sector, skilled Indo-Fijian labour has emigrated and urbanisation has increased sharply. There has also been a reassertion of élite politics, a reassertion that stands in sharp relief to social change in a vigorous civil society. The end of the ‘Sunday ban’ and the introduction of television have most vividly illustrated this change. In 1999 Fiji is a very different country from that which was traumatised by the 1987 coups.
Moreover, change will continue to confront Fiji in the future. The new constitutional settlement agreed to in 1997, alterations in agrarian relations emerging out of the termination of land leases, the further erosion of trade preferences as a consequence of a new round of multilateral world trade negotiations and continued globalisation have major implications for the country in the next fifteen years. For those interested in Fiji, these changes and the challenges they create need to be understood. Recent scholarship on Fiji has however often tended to look back, focusing on the changes which occurred in the twelve years following the coups. Necessary as a sound historical perspective is, it is also necessary to use historical understanding to seek to grasp the implications for present and for the future. This is especially the case in a society that has been as divided as Fiji.

That such an approach has been largely lacking indicates, in academic terms, a gap in the literature on Fiji. This gap was identified by Haroon Akram-Lodhi and Robbie Robertson in 1997 and led to the development of an informal collaborative research project based at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, the Netherlands. The choice of the ISS as the base for the project might at first glance appear odd, being situated such a long way from the South Pacific region. However, a fortuitous set of circumstances meant that over the course of eighteen months the ISS was host, for varying periods of time, to seven of the contributors to the current volume. Moreover, the ISS has a long if somewhat understated tradition of collaborative teaching, research and advisory services in the South Pacific region. Thus, rather than being an odd choice, the ISS was in fact an ideal choice to serve as the base for the project.

A second fortuitous coincidence has reinforced the need for the forward-looking research contained in this book. The primary editorial work on the book was completed around the time of Fiji’s 1999 general elections, the outcome of which came as a surprise to many local and international observers. In the 1999 general elections the peoples of Fiji resoundingly rejected both the government and the two parties which were largely responsible for steering the 1997 constitutional settlement through parliament, the Soqosoqo Ni Vakavulewa Ni Taukei (SVT) and the National Federation Party (NFP). In a vivid repudiation of the legacy of the coups, victory went to the FLP, which obtained an outright majority. The victory of the FLP led to the elevation of its leader, Mahendra Chaudhry, to the post of Prime Minister—the first Indo-Fijian to hold that position in the history of the country.
It is unlikely that those who framed the 1997 constitutional settlement could have envisaged a situation in which one party would achieve an overall majority of parliamentary seats at this stage in Fiji’s political development, garnering limited but nevertheless significant support from across the multiplicity of Fiji’s ethnic communities. However, despite the surprise of the outcome, the Cabinet which has emerged is a multiparty one, in line with the principles of the Constitution and the political processes which it has engendered, and with a greater range of representation than that of any previous government in Fiji—a situation sought by those who framed the Constitution and welcomed by the peoples of Fiji.

The FLP was elected on a platform of social and economic justice. Such a platform stands in sharp relief to the policies of structural adjustment pursued by successive governments since 1986. However, it is unclear whether the FLP will be able, in the context of multiparty government and in the context of the probable end of the country’s preferential market access for most of its exports, to formulate independent policies that address the country’s remarkably poor economic performance. Yet the need for fresh, forward-looking economic policy is urgent: Fiji’s rate of growth of GDP per capita has fallen from 4.2 per cent per annum between 1965 and 1980 to only 0.5 per cent per annum between 1980 and 1993, and the political consequences of deepening economic insecurity could be significant. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether Fiji’s new government will be able to ‘adjust’ structural adjustment.

At the same time, it remains to be seen whether the victory of the explicitly multiethnic FLP represents the bold leap into the dark which is needed to move beyond the primacy of the politics of identity in Fiji. Granted, the signs from the new government have appeared promising. As Mahendra Chaudhry said on 19 May 1999, after having been sworn in as Prime Minister, ‘I, and my government, are committed to promoting multi-racialism in our country, multi-racialism that brings our different communities together’. In such circumstances, it is to be hoped that a forward-looking assessment of the broad social, economic and political issues facing Fiji in the present and the future of the sort contained in this book will be useful to individuals and to policymakers seeking to bring communities together. Nonetheless, the contributors to this book recognise the
limits of their intervention. Obviously, no book can foster the emergence of genuinely united Fiji community. Rather, the emergence of a united Fiji community depends upon all the peoples of Fiji realising that they have changed, that Fiji has changed, and that the only way in which they can move forward into their collective futures is together.