

Conclusion: Playing the politics of respect

Hubris

In the months that followed Rear Admiral (Ret) Voreqe Bainimarama's electoral victory, the rout did not dissipate. Almost immediately the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) announced Fiji's readmission and Australia's Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, visited Bainimarama to proclaim the formal removal of sanctions, new investments in job-creation programs, the relaunch of senior officials' meetings and the inclusion of Fiji in its seasonal workers and New Colombo programs.¹ Bishop's quick response did not, however, check Bainimarama's determination to consolidate Fiji's changed foreign policy position. Fiji returned to PIF but refused to participate in its leaders' meetings or back away from its desire to reform PIF's architecture.² Fiji also maintained its 'hardline' on the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus trade talks.³ In Brisbane for an Australia–Fiji Business Forum later in 2015, Bainimarama reminded his audience: 'It is a great shame ... Australia and

1 *Fiji Times*, 1 November 2014.

2 *Islands Business*, 21 January 2015. Fiji proposed that its former Foreign Minister, Kaliopate Tavola, be PIF's new secretary general. He supported Bainimarama's stance that Australia and New Zealand become donors and development partners of PIF only, and not sit at the leaders' table. Bainimarama deliberately avoided PNG's Prime Minister at the Japanese Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting in early 2015, fearing he would be lobbied to attend the forthcoming Moresby Forum.

3 Fiji rejoined the trade talks but held out for long-term improved market access, the maintenance of policy space, and binding commitments on labour mobility and development cooperation. There were 'not enough pluses in the PACER for Fiji to commit', Bainimarama claimed (*Fiji Times*, 8 & 17 May 2016). In September 2016, Bainimarama refused to sign PACER Plus: it was 'too one-sided, too restrictive, places too many obligations on us that we cannot afford to meet' (*Fiji Times*, 15 October 2016). Australia and NZ officials, however, believed it possible to conclude the agreement in 2017, the eighth year of negotiations (*Fiji Times*, 1 February 2017).

New Zealand – our traditional friends – turned their backs on us when we set out to substitute a flawed democracy in Fiji with a proper one like theirs.’ And he added:

How much sooner we might have been able to return Fiji to parliamentary rule if we hadn’t expended so much effort on simply surviving. If you had been more understanding. More engaged. Been able to recognize that defending the status quo in Fiji was indefensible, intellectually and morally.⁴

The lesson, Foreign Minister Inoke Kubuabola claimed shortly after the elections, was simple: Fiji ‘can never again permit [itself] to be dependent – politically, strategically or economically – on a narrow group of powerful countries’.⁵

Days later, Bainimarama hosted both India’s new Prime Minister Narendra Modi and China’s President Xi Jinping in Fiji. They came, Bainimarama declared, because they regard Fiji as important: ‘They acknowledge us as a regional leader—a preeminent island nation that is also playing an increased role on the wider global stage.’⁶ Fiji’s years in the cold had permitted it to develop a powerful sense of difference with the past. It had established new diplomatic missions, joined the Non-Alignment Movement, gained alternative military support from Russia,⁷ chaired the G77 + China and the International Sugar Organization, and created a new regional body, the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), the latter still a bone of contention with Australia and New Zealand.⁸ Its UN ambassador, Peter Thomson, became President of the UN General Assembly in September 2016. And Fiji had developed a Green Growth Framework as a blueprint

4 *PACNews*, 15 November 2015.

5 *Fiji Sun*, 15 October 2014.

6 *Fiji Sun*, 18 November 2014.

7 Russian support was long in the making. Its Foreign Minister visited Suva in 2012 and Bainimarama pushed for a deal to supply much-needed new weaponry to its Golan Heights peacekeepers when he went to Moscow in 2013. In January 2016, some 25 containers of Russian arms and equipment, worth an estimated \$19 million, arrived in Suva, initially creating public confusion as to its purpose. Bainimarama later declared that the Blackrock military base in Nadi would become a new peacekeeping training institute (*Economist*, 23 January 2016).

8 *Fiji Times*, 1 September 2015; *Australian*, 8 September 2015. Bainimarama accused the two neighbours of continuing to lobby Pacific countries not to attend PIDF meetings. Only eight of 14 PIF leaders attended the 2015 PIDF. Its acting secretary general, Amena Yauvoli, soon left to become – briefly – ambassador for climate change and oceans. In April 2016, he emerged as the new director general of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), a sign perhaps that Fiji wished to reinvigorate an organisation its former leader claimed lacked sufficient support from MSG governments (*Fiji Sun*, 9 April 2016). Samoan François Martel replaced him as PIDF Secretary General in September 2015, hoping to focus the PIDF on sustainable development through blue-green economies.

for development that allowed it to challenge the climate change policies of its large neighbours, gain prominence on the world stage for green leadership, become chair of the 23rd session of the Conference of Parties (COP 23) 2017 to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change at the latter's secretariat in Bonn,⁹ and co-chair the UN Conference on Oceans. 'Make no mistake, our resolve in the last eight years, our strategic direction as a nation and our ability to think outside the box,' Bainimarama asserted, 'has gained Fiji much respect around the world.'¹⁰ This stance was not going to change.¹¹

At home, Bainimarama delivered the same message. When parliament met for the first time in mid-October 2014, it was at the old parliament site in the downtown Government Buildings, not at Rabuka's former Veiuto complex. There is 'something deeply symbolic about having brought history full circle to this chamber', Bainimarama declared. His President agreed; it served to 'draw a line under the years of division that have held Fiji back and herald a new era of unity and purpose'.¹² But, as Nailatikau gave his address to the newly assembled parliament, it became apparent that FijiFirst had no intention of reaching out to its opposition, especially over the Constitution and parliamentary procedures. Instead it would focus on programs already begun: increasing

9 *Fiji Sun*, 2 June 2015. Fiji became the first nation in the world to ratify the Paris Agreement following the UN Climate Change Conference in December 2015, promising to generate all its electricity needs from renewable sources by 2030 and to cut emissions by 30 per cent (*Guardian*, 16 February 2016). Climate change is a real issue for Fiji. By mid-2015 it had spent \$2 million relocating three villages threatened by rising sea waters and had identified another 45 (*Fiji Times*, 24 June 2015) under threat. The World Bank estimated Fiji would spend \$478 million by 2020 on coastal protection, much of it on sea walls (*Fiji Times*, 31 July 2016). Fiji also offered to provide a permanent refuge to people from Kiribati and Tuvalu should they be displaced as a result of rising seas (*Fiji Times*, 25 May 2016).

10 *Fiji Sun*, 18 November 2014. Anna Powles and Jose Sousa-Santos are uncertain as to the long-term impact of new players such as China and Russia on the Pacific. Fiji has not supported China's position on South China Sea access, despite receiving nearly \$700 million in Chinese aid between 2006 and 2013 (more than Australia's \$620 million contribution), but it did abstain during the UN General Assembly vote on Russia's annexation of the Crimea in 2014. Nonetheless, Fiji's courting of new partners has effectively shifted its foreign policy and challenged the South Pacific's traditional security orthodoxy ('Principled engagement: rebuilding defence ties with Fiji', Lowy Institute Analysis paper, Sydney, July 2016).

11 Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte are more circumspect, believing this a journey with no obvious end (G Fry & S Tarte, *The New Pacific Diplomacy*. Canberra: ANU Press, 2015, p. 15). Powles and Sousa-Santos are similarly uncertain as to how the PIF rift will play out, but believe that Australia and New Zealand 'will have to be smarter in their engagement' with Fiji and the Pacific ('Principled engagement'). Meanwhile Bainimarama continues to push boundaries, requesting Fijian visa-free access to Europe's Schengen zone in 2016 (*Fiji Times*, 7 December 2016).

12 *Fiji Sun*, 14 October 2014. Of course Veiuto represented both Rabuka's failed communal politics and the site of the 2000 coup.

water and electricity subsidies to the poor, providing squatters with long-term leases, encouraging the commercial development of Taukei land, extending the Tertiary Education Loan Scheme, providing free education also to preschools, raising the minimum wage and supplying low-income earners with free hospital procedures and medicine.¹³ When combined with funding for long-neglected infrastructure, the government believed it had a winning formula that could take it beyond the next election. In 2016, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum described as unprecedented the economic growth in excess of 4 per cent that had occurred over the past three years, and proudly noted that government interventions for those at the bottom of the socio-economic scale meant that, rather than widen disparities between rich and poor, growth had actually reduced poverty levels by more than 3 per cent.¹⁴ 'Compassion for the vulnerable' represented a hallmark of Bainimarama's leadership, he argued.¹⁵

The strategy caught the opposition parties off guard; they accused the government of remaining in campaign mode. But the real problem, Steven Ratuva noted, lay with their refusal to respect the election process.¹⁶ The National Federation Party (NFP), he argued, needed to expand its appeal. It began the parliamentary session focusing on decrees, media restrictions, deteriorating services, and the unexplained discrepancies highlighted in the tabled Auditor-General's reports from 2010. It demanded a review of the 2013 Constitution and supported the Social Democratic Liberal Party's (SODELPA) petition to reinstate the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) on the grounds that the public were not consulted on its abolition.¹⁷ It called for a government of national unity and requested dialogue on 'critical issues'. It opposed the government's repeal of the death penalty in the *Royal Fiji Military Forces Act*.¹⁸

13 *Fiji Times*, 8 October 2014. In 2016, Bainimarama claimed that he wished to be known as the first prime minister to make education free to all Fijians (*Fiji Sun*, 13 January 2016).

14 *Fiji Sun*, 21 July 2016.

15 *Fiji Sun*, 10 December 2016.

16 *Fiji Sun*, 10 April 2015.

17 *Fiji Sun*, 30 April 2016.

18 As NFP President, Draunidalo expanded the debate, calling the United Nations a useless institution that sponsored mercenaries and let genocides occur (*Fiji Sun*, 20 February 2015).

With such a huge majority, Bainimarama felt no pressing need to deviate from his revolution. Instead he announced plans for a new flag for Fiji to better reflect his achievement in creating a new Fiji.¹⁹ And he indulged in petty politics. An unforeseen discrepancy in the registration of the NFP auditors saw the small party threatened with exclusion from parliament at the start of 2016,²⁰ leaving its leader, Biman Prasad, impotently railing against the lack of bipartisanship, the continuance of draconian media decrees, the lack of fundamental rights, dictatorial and inconsistent economic management, and the development of a culture of servility and sycophancy.²¹

The larger SODELPA presented a different challenge. Certainly it raised similar issues as the NFP, with MP Niko Nawaikula provocatively suggesting that the government's refusal to review the Constitution was tantamount to inviting another coup.²² He and his leader, Ro Teimumu Kepa, were members of the Fiji Native Tribal Congress, which, since 2010, had claimed that Bainimarama – and later his Constitution – breached UN-mandated indigenous rights by abolishing the GCC and the exclusive Fijian name, and by denying iTaukei self-determination.²³ The matter quickly came to a head in late 2014 when small groups of Taukei in Nadroga and Ra, under the influence of a Taukei expatriate

19 *Fiji Times*, 10 March, 7 July & 24 December 2015. Public responses to the proposal were muted and the opposition refused to engage in the process. Bainimarama argued that the flag carried both colonial and Bauan features, and Fiji now needed a more modern design. But, after witnessing how Fijians rallied around the flag during Fiji's first Olympic gold win in August 2016, he dropped the new flag from his list of priorities (*Fiji Sun*, 18 August 2016).

20 The NFP's auditors were not registered with the Fiji Institute of Accountants. Nineteen days later on 19 February 2016, the suspension ended when the NFP filed legal action in the High Court. Wadan Narsey argues that the suspension enabled the government to seize control of the Public Accounts Committee and change standing orders (*Fiji Times*, 21 February 2016). Undoubtedly this move assisted the government to reduce scrutiny of the Auditor-General's 2010–14 reports, which revealed that salaries to then ministers had bypassed Finance and been paid through a private accounting firm, Aliz Pacific Ltd, owned by a relative of the Attorney-General. The Auditor-General questioned the lack of supporting documentation. The government did not respond to questions from then PAC chair, Biman Prasad (*Fiji Times*, 7 November 2014; 17 September 2015).

21 *Fiji Times*, 30 January 2016. Prasad highlighted the Prime Minister's pettiness: telling opposition leaders to 'jump in a deep pool' and advising gay people to shift to Iceland if they wished to marry, did not – he claimed – produce a worthy legacy. See also Prasad's address at the Centre for Strategic Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, 26 May 2016 (*Fiji Times*, 4 June 2016).

22 www.coupfourandahalf.com, 17 October 2014.

23 *Fiji Times*, 20 April 2015. In 2016, Kepa admitted in parliament that she now supported the use of 'Fijian' as a common name. To date, however, the party has not officially corrected its stance (*Fiji Sun*, 13 February 2016).

who urged them to rise up against the Bainimarama government, declared their provinces sovereign Christian states. As a consequence, by September 2015, 63 persons had been arrested and charged with sedition.

Although SODELPA distanced itself from the Taukeists, it sang from the same hymn sheet. Both Kepa and her deputy, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, used much of their parliamentary time attacking government policies as anti-Taukei. Lalabalavu criticised the government's planned divestment of shares in state enterprises on the grounds that the entry of foreign companies reduced opportunities for Taukei investments and exposed the country to human trafficking, drugs and terrorism.²⁴ Kepa complained that government moves to prioritise places at state boarding schools for rural students would victimise iTaukei, and she insisted that the Constitution be put to a referendum.²⁵ As late as May 2016, Kepa referred to the government as a dictatorship and suggested that, when SODELPA becomes the government in 2018, it would take to task those journalists 'who are props of the dictatorship'.²⁶

Such attacks enabled Bainimarama to assume the high moral ground. 'SODELPA keeps summoning up the past and preying on the fears of the iTaukei people about the security of their land and their way of life,' he told the Kadavu Provincial Council in February 2015: 'It is divisive. It is offensive. And it simply isn't true ... There is no threat to iTaukei – to our land, culture, institutions or religion.'²⁷ He told school cadets in Nadi that 'The future for Fiji isn't one of a privileged few keeping only the best for themselves and not sharing with other ordinary common Fijians'.²⁸ But he was not above baiting SODELPA. Only English could be spoken in parliament and chiefly titles were not to be used. 'When you walk out,' he declared, 'you can pick it up again, your Ratu, your Adi, and you walk out with it.'²⁹

24 *Fiji Times*, 13 December 2014. The Fiji Electricity Authority (FEA) became an early target for divestment.

25 *Fiji Times*, 13 April & 24 December 2015.

26 *Fiji Sun*, 4 May 2016.

27 *Fiji Sun*, 20 February 2015.

28 *Fiji Sun*, 23 April 2015.

29 *Fiji Times*, 11 February 2015.

As Ratuva commented, SODELPA was a dream opposition for FijiFirst. By constantly focusing on Taukei issues and the 2006 coup, it placed itself exactly where the assertively inclusive FijiFirst wanted it.³⁰ Discontent within SODELPA did the Opposition no favours either. Discontent derived in part from its stunning defeat in the 2014 elections. Kepa blamed her party's defeat on Bainimarama's fear-mongering. Prior to voting, Bainimarama implied that Suva would burn again if FijiFirst lost power and Kepa claimed that fear drove voters into his arms.³¹ But, having focused so much on Taukei matters during the election campaign, it soon became clear that some of her MPs held different views on what mattered to iTaukei. In fact, some issues around which the party appeared to present a united front were potentially destabilising. For example, while Kepa and Nawaikula regarded the disestablishment of the GCC as a pivotal symbol of Bainimarama's trashing of indigenous rights, MPs like Mosese Bilitavu believed that indigenous rights should not be used as a reason for the re-establishment of the GCC. Far from being a traditional indigenous institution, he argued, the GCC had been a colonial-era ploy by Bau to assert dominance over Fiji and eradicate the influence of once powerful *tikina* such as Verata. Indeed, the whole chiefly system, he asserted, was politicised by the descendants of the dominant chiefs of 1874 to augment their authority.³²

These were not new arguments, and equating Taukei rights with indigenous rights had long been bedevilled by the problem of how to define the group. Who are Taukei? Who are not? Prior to 1990, most Fiji-born descendants of Pacific islanders were considered Taukei for voting purposes. Rabuka's 1990 Constitution stripped that status from them. Attempts were then made to excise Taukei of those with mixed heritage. Hence Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's fears that the same fate awaited Lauans in Viti Levu.³³ Group rights, as opposed to human rights, always carry this risk.

30 *Fiji Sun*, 10 April 2015. SODELPA's weakness is potentially FijiFirst's weakness also. Should SODELPA abandon its communal and chiefly focus and transform itself into a national party like FijiFirst, it may become a credible alternative government in the future.

31 *Fiji Sun*, 28 September 2014. Mick Beddoes claimed SODELPA lost because 'the election process was compromised' (*Fiji Sun*, 25 October 2015).

32 *Fiji Sun*, 10 October 2015.

33 *fijilive*, 16 October 2000. Qarase's government attempted to impose Taukei colonial patrilineal criteria on Rotumans also.

Unsurprisingly, then, confusion over indigeneity abounds. Bainimarama has described iTaukei, Banabans and Rotumans as indigenous peoples of Fiji, although Banabans (from Kiribati) only settled in Fiji (on Rabi Island) after 1945. When Rotuman Jioji Konrote became the new Fiji President in October 2015, Brij Lal welcomed him as Fiji's first 'non-indigenous' president.³⁴ Clearly indigeneity and Taukei identity are not one and the same. iTaukei and Rotumans may meet one UN criterion by having 'historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies', even if in different parts of Fiji. They do not, however, satisfy other criteria, for example, that they 'form at present non-dominant sectors of society'.³⁵ Add to that the complexities of colonial institutions and customs that are accorded traditional status by some indigenous peoples but not others, and a recipe for division and hatred soon emerges. Hence Bainimarama's desire to call everyone Fijian, to reject ethno-nationalism, and move on with what he sees as more important issues facing modern Fiji. 'We drew a line under the past,' he declared: 'We reset the national compass.'³⁶

Not so SODELPA, but its problems were not solely confined to its backward-looking agenda. Many within the party blamed Kepa and Laisenia Qarase for its failure to win the 2014 election. They were unhappy with the party's management. Kepa did not inform them of Mick Beddoes' appointment as principal administration officer in the Opposition office or of her support for Biman Prasad as chair of the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee and Richard Naidu as a member of the Constitutional Services Commission. When shadow portfolios were apportioned, Kepa chose education, not the iTaukei affairs and sugar portfolios that Bainimarama held in addition to being prime minister. Thus she lost the opportunity to directly confront Bainimarama on the floor of the parliament; that role went to her deputy instead.³⁷

34 www.coupfourandahalf.com, 19 October 2015.

35 *The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: A Manual for National Human Rights Institutions*. Sydney & Geneva: Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013, p. 6.

36 *Fiji Times*, 4 March 2015. Bainimarama told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva that the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples did not readily apply in Fiji. The Taukei had not been dispossessed of their land; their land, culture, traditions and languages were protected in the Constitution and were not under threat (*Fiji Sun*, 4 March 2015).

37 *Fiji Sun*, 20 October 2014. Some MPs in her party wanted Aseri Radrodro, an accountant and auditor, as the Public Accounts Committee chair instead. Additionally, some SODELPA MPs opposed granting NFP members front bench seats in parliament, given that the NFP had rejected being in coalition with SODELPA prior to the elections (*Fiji Sun*, 15 May 2016). Such dissatisfaction weakened Opposition solidarity.

By boycotting the special sitting of parliament for an address by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, she failed to rise above party politics. She also led SODELPA out of the chamber during the budget address. She undertook an unendorsed and reportedly disorganised tour of Vanua Levu. And she returned from the United States without attending a UN indigenous conference, claiming that she had been treated with disrespect.³⁸

A report on the state of SODELPA in mid-2015, requested by five MPs led by Bilitavu and Aseri Radrodro, criticised party governance, financial management and leadership. It recommended Kepa's expulsion. A disciplinary committee meeting subsequently cleared her of wrong doing³⁹ but, with the party divided, no clear way forward seemed possible, especially after its deputy leader, Lalabalavu, seen by some as a possible successor, was banned from parliament for two years in May 2015 for making a derogatory comment about the Speaker of the House. He had also attempted to bring Sitiveni Rabuka into the party prior to the elections.⁴⁰ Later he tried to install him as a vice president, but Kepa refused and Rabuka reportedly resigned from the party. With the subsequent resignations of general secretary Pio Tabaiwalu, Beddoes and Pita Waqavonovono from their posts, SODELPA appeared to reach a new low. Even if Lalabalavu had assumed the leadership, it is unlikely he would have received the support of dissidents, who wanted to keep chiefs out of the frontline.⁴¹

To foster unity, SODELPA pardoned Kepa instead. But, during 2016, discontent rumbled on, focusing on her unadvertised appointment of Adi Laufitu Malani as her personal assistant and her dogged pursuit of the GCC lost cause.⁴² Kepa seemed unwilling or unable to escape her chiefly straitjacket. Perhaps for that reason she announced in June 2016 her intention not to recontest party leadership. In the tussle that quickly followed, Rabuka finally made his way back into political leadership,

38 *Fiji Sun*, 24 May 2016. No one met her at Los Angeles from where she intended to transit to New York.

39 *Fiji Sun*, 13 December 2015.

40 *Fiji Sun*, 3 & 11 September, 22 October 2015. In June 2016, the NFP's Tupou Draunidalo was similarly excluded for the remainder of the parliament for making a derogatory comment (*Fiji Times*, 4 June 2016); the same fate awaited Opposition Whip Ratu Isoa Tikoca – for making anti-Muslim remarks (*Fiji Sun*, 30 September 2016).

41 *Fiji Sun*, 12 July 2016.

42 *Fiji Sun*, 3 February, 12 & 26 April 2016; see Neelesh Gounder, 'The Opposition in an effective democracy', *Fiji Times*, 28 May 2016.

hoping to repeat his 1992 performance as leader of the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT), and promising to make SODELPA relevant to more Fijians by abandoning ethno-nationalism.⁴³

Nonetheless, some party members were unhappy with yet another return to the past. They believed that Rabuka was too close to the military machine they conveniently blamed for all Fiji's political woes. Indeed, no Opposition leader except Rabuka attended Constitution Day ceremonies in September 2016. The national interest, he declared, should always come before party interests, a line that distanced him further from some of his new colleagues. Party resignations soon followed and – in the absence of clear party policies on cooperation – the task of creating an effective Opposition coalition and widening its support base ahead of elections in 2018 remained a work in progress.⁴⁴ When the government proposed an increase in parliamentary allowances, SODELPA could not even maintain unified opposition.⁴⁵

Bainimarama did not have it all his own way, however. The militarisation of the police force remained an ongoing issue after the resignation of Commissioner Ben Groenewald, a South African appointed only in May 2014 to secure organisational and operational changes ahead of elections and to end its reputation as 'a brutal force'. He cited continued military interference in policing, a reference to three police officers who had beaten and sexually assaulted an escaped prisoner in 2012. Groenewald had reopened the case after the military recruited the officers, claiming the police had abandoned them. Brigadier General Sitiveni Qiliho now replaced Groenewald as Police Commissioner in November 2015 but, before long, found himself embroiled in controversy when he re-employed

43 Kepa remained the parliamentary Opposition leader, indicating that she would not contest the next election. Both Kepa and Lalabalavu officially announced their withdrawal in January 2017. Reportedly Lalabalavu approached Rabuka in April 2016 to succeed Kepa as party leader (*Fiji Sun*, 8 May 2016; 14 January 2017).

44 *Fiji Sun*, 2 & 25 June, 8 & 28 September 2016. Former youth wing member Pita Waqavonovono and Beddoes were reported to be establishing their own political party and planning a grand coalition ahead of the 2018 election (*fjivillage*, 19 November 2016). Opposition to Rabuka centred on his coup leadership in 1987 and the similarity of his credentials and outlook with Bainimarama's. Beddoes called removing a leader (Kepa) who had polled the SODELPA's largest votes (35 per cent of its votes) 'an act of lunacy' (*Fiji Sun*, 26 June 2016). NFP President Draunidalo took the opportunity to claim her party the only one fit to contest the next elections; its members and leaders had never planned or taken part in coups. She argued that the NFP had to differentiate itself and would not engage with people involved in coups. Her leader, however, did not endorse this strategy (*Fiji Times*, 27 June 2016; *Fiji Sun*, 27 June 2016).

45 Lalabalavu and Rabuka presented contradictory advice on the parliamentary allowance vote to their parliamentary members (*Fiji Sun*, 6 October 2016).

police officers who Groenewald had stood down over the 2014 sexual assault and death of a robbery suspect in Nadi and the sexual assault of another prisoner. Qiliho claimed they were needed in the fight against Fiji's rising crime rate. The Chief of Intelligence and Investigations, Harry Brown, resigned in protest.⁴⁶

Another resignation surprised in late 2015. Brigadier General Mosese Tikoitoga had only been Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) for one year, but allegedly proved too independent, promoting officers of his choice into senior roles and denying Bainimarama's personal bodyguards access to the Queen Elizabeth Barracks officers' mess. Not long after, Rear Admiral Viliame Naupoto became the new RFMF Commander and Tikoitoga was 'exiled' as ambassador to Ethiopia.⁴⁷ Fresh human rights issues also arose; a Lautoka internet café owner alleged that he had been tortured by police in late November 2015 after he sent copies to the Police Commissioner and the Attorney-General of plans to destabilise the government. His house was later firebombed in an attack reminiscent of military special ops after 2009. Bizarrely, historian Brij Lal and his economist wife, Padma Lal, remained barred from returning to Fiji.⁴⁸

Disturbing as these matters were, they did not unsettle the government or force it to reach out to the Opposition parties. Instead, strong economic growth bolstered government confidence. Four per cent GDP growth in 2015 permitted an optimistic budget at the end of the year, with VAT reduced to 9 per cent, and record spending on land development, roads, water and electricity. To much fanfare, the government announced a new \$103 million infrastructure loan from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), the first for Fiji in 23 years. Bainimarama claimed only to be reversing the neglect of former governments and predicted that unemployment would fall and that tourism, already

46 *Fiji Sun*, 9 February 2016; *Fiji Times*, 3 April 2016. The police, like the military, had also to confront its own violent past. In July 2016, images of Colo villagers beaten and tortured during drug raids in 2009 circulated on social media (*Fiji Times*, 13 July 2016). Eight former police officers and one soldier were found guilty in late 2016 of the sexual assault and rape of robbery suspects near Sigatoka in 2014, one of whom who later died of his injuries. They were sentenced variously from seven to nine years (*Fiji Sun*, 12 November 2016; *Fiji Times*, 22 November 2016). Burglaries increased 31 per cent between 2014 and 2015. In 2016, carjackings and home invasions also increased.

47 *Fiji Times*, 12 & 20 November 2015; *Fiji Sun*, 10 November 2015; *Economist*, 23 January 2016. At the same time, Mohammad Aziz returned from long service leave as Deputy Commander.

48 *Fiji Sun*, 17 December 2015; *Fiji Times*, 16 December & 4 July 2015.

comprising 30 per cent of GDP, would soon be a \$2 billion industry.⁴⁹ Fiji Airways opened new services to Singapore and San Francisco. Barry Whiteside, governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji, predicted growth in mineral water, garments, timber, mining and manufacturing in the years ahead and noted that remittances had become the largest foreign exchange earner for Fiji after tourism. He also predicted that attention to micro and small-to-medium enterprises would 'make growth more inclusive for rural dwellers'.⁵⁰

But there were dangers. Despite the International Monetary Fund praising Fiji for becoming a more equal society, ECREA's Father Kevin Barr doubted government claims that poverty had fallen to 28.1 per cent: Fiji's cost of living had risen over 40 per cent since 2009, domestic violence and crime had increased, so too the number of squatters.⁵¹ VAT may have fallen, but not necessarily in a way that assisted the poor, given that exemptions for basic food and medicines were removed. In addition, continued economic growth remained too dependent on debt, and increased debt (46 per cent of GDP and projected to rise to 50.4 per cent by mid-2017) potentially threatened both Fiji's B+ credit rating⁵² and the viability of its major internal lender, the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF).

49 *Fiji Times*, 18 April & 25 May 2016; *Fiji Sun*, 17 November 2015; *Financial Review*, 18 November 2015. The World Bank opened a new liaison office in Suva in May 2016.

50 *Fiji Times*, 19 July 2016. Remittances reached \$492 million in 2015, 28 per cent higher than in 2014 (\$354 million), reinforcing the government's claim that its focus on the education and welfare of its people would pay dividends in the long run. In 2016, remittances rose a further 6 per cent to \$530 million and to \$605 million in 2017 (*Fiji Times*, 1 September 2016, 7 July 2017). Whiteside anticipated that an expansion in Australia's seasonal worker program for agriculture, tourism and aged care, together with British army recruitment, would strengthen labour mobility further. He also congratulated the garment industry for developing niche products such as designer and sportswear that enabled it finally to realise the value of high end products. It now earned \$100 million annually, and employed 7,000 workers, 90 per cent being women. Dependence on Australasian markets for sales, however, and a falling Australian dollar hampered growth. The rising US dollar increased the cost of raw materials (*Fiji Times*, 9 December 2016; 28 February 2017). Whiteside believed a similar niche awaited micro and small enterprises with virgin coconut oil and seaweed production.

51 *PACNews*, 21 April 2016; crosbiew.blogspot.com, 29 April 2009.

52 *Fiji Times*, 28 April & 23 June 2016. Welfare and debt promised a bleak future, according to Biman Prasad (*Fiji Times*, 3 December 2014); however, due to economic growth, the debt to GDP ratio had fallen from 56 per cent at the end of 2010, where it had been stuck since 2000, and is forecast to fall to 43 per cent of a much larger economy by mid-2017 (*Fiji Times*, 30 May 2016; Joseph Veramu, 'Budget and Prospects', *Fiji Times*, 7 July 2017). Over 70 per cent of Fiji's debt is held internally.

Once more, the consequences of agricultural neglect loomed large, especially in the long-suffering sugar industry where the government proposed legal sanctions to compel greater production.⁵³ Pine and mahogany industries were also affected by longstanding neglect, their potential for value-adding largely unrealised. Land-tenure laws and policies similarly constrained investment in agriculture.⁵⁴ Neglect imposed a drag on growth, but was not responsible for the sharp fall in projected GDP growth for 2016, from 3.7 per cent to 2.4.⁵⁵ On this occasion, the cause lay in the unexpected. Cyclone Winston – a category 5 hurricane, the strongest ever recorded in the southern hemisphere – struck Fiji on 20 February and left a \$2 billion trail of disaster as it tracked between the two main islands with wind speeds up to 233 kilometres per hour: 44 lives

53 *Fiji Times*, 9 May 2016. Only 52.5 per cent of cane-farming land remained cultivated in 2016, sugar production had fallen 30 per cent since 2006 (from 310,000 to 220,000 tonnes), and the number of growers had also fallen 30 per cent (from 18,636 to 12,872). With costs of production close to \$50 for a tonne of cane, returns from the \$75 price for a tonne of cane put the average grower on an income of \$4,500, well below the minimum wage. Further problems loomed for the industry; EU sugar quotas end in October 2017 and British importer Tate & Lyle ceased purchasing Fair Trade sugar from Fiji in August 2015. Some 5,000 members of the Lautoka Cane Producers Association had relied upon Fair Trade income since 2012 to subsidise sugar production (*Fiji Times*, 4 December 2016). Prasad urged the government to boost production by guaranteeing growers \$90 a tonne (*Fiji Times*, 30 July 2016). Instead, its 2016 Sugar Cane Industry Bill proposed the complete nationalisation of the financially stricken Fiji Sugar Corporation and the introduction of draconian penalties to enforce harvesting and planting (*Fiji Times*, 14 May & 23 November 2016). Diversification plans for two mills were put on hold (*Fiji Times*, 31 May 2016), despite the lack of cane for crushing making all the four mills unviable (Biman Prasad, 'Sugar sector analysis: Caught up in cobwebs', *Fiji Times*, 4 March 2017; the cyclone-damaged Penang mill in Rakiraki closed in early 2017). So, too, plans to pay farmers for the quality of cane they delivered to the mills, rather than its weight (*Fiji Times*, 30 December 2016). Fiji still dreamed, however, of replacing agricultural imports with local produce, especially for the tourist sector, but also made slow progress (*Financial Review*, 18 October 2015). Indeed, agriculture's contribution to GDP continued to decline, from 12 per cent in 2006 to 8 per cent in 2016 (*Fiji Sun*, 1 December 2016).

54 *Fiji Times*, 19 July 2016. Address by Reserve Bank of Fiji governor Whiteside to the 2016 ADB Pacific Update Conference held at University of the South Pacific. Mahogany stagnated, with little investment in replanting (*Fiji Times*, 14 November 2016). Bainimarama committed to redevelop the pine industry, with new resources to extend the industry in 2017 to maritime islands like Kadavu (*Fiji Sun*, 22 January 2017).

55 This was temporarily restored to 3 per cent at the time of the 2016–17 budget. Projections of 3.6 per cent GDP growth for 2017 and 3.2 per cent in 2018 and 2019 allowed Sayed-Khaiyum to forecast an unprecedented nine consecutive years of growth from 2010 (*Fiji Sun*, 21 July 2016).

and 40,000 homes lost, 419 schools damaged, 160 schools destroyed, and an estimated \$200 million loss in crops. The devastation impacted nearly 40 per cent of Fiji's population and drove up inflation.⁵⁶

Bainimarama's government rose quickly to the challenge and introduced novel initiatives. It launched a successful adopt-a-school program as a target for foreign aid,⁵⁷ as well as an adopt-a-village fund. 'Help for Homes' provided \$88 million in immediate financial assistance for home owners earning less than \$50,000. Depending on the nature of damage, a home owner received a card loaded with up to \$7,000, redeemable at any hardware outlet.⁵⁸ The FNPF also allowed members to withdraw up to \$5,000 and, by May 2016, it had disbursed nearly \$300 million. In addition, government paid social welfare benefits as a lump sum for three months to assist some 44,000 families recover.⁵⁹ In its budget in

56 *Fiji Times*, 5 March 2016, 27 March 2017; *Fiji Sun*, 21 January 2017. Sugar production fell over 26 per cent to 164,330 tonnes in 2016 (*Fiji Times*, 31 December 2016); however, major tourism areas were less affected, enabling a faster recovery for the Fiji economy (*Fiji Times*, 30 May 2016; *Fiji Sun*, 4 December 2016). Fiji Electricity Authority infrastructure damage alone stood at \$30 million. The Fiji Development Bank, which allocated 20 per cent of its loans to agriculture, reported losses of \$4 million and immediately provided assistance to farmers and businesses affected (*Fiji Times*, 24 January 2017). Inflation peaked at 6.8 per cent in January 2017 (*Fiji Times*, 28 February & 26 March 2017), with half attributed to kava price increases. By May 2017, inflation had fallen to 2.5 per cent (*Fiji Times*, 5 July 2017).

57 India, for example, pledged to adopt 20 schools and gave the government \$2.7 million. In 2016, India also donated \$10.6 million in cash, relief materials, equipment and seeds. Indonesia contributed to the reconstruction of Queen Victoria School, and other governments, including Japan, which contributed \$3.2 million for four schools, also committed resources to the school-rebuild effort. The Fiji Government committed \$207.9 million in the 2016–17 budget (*Fiji Times*, 26 January & 2 February 2017; *Fiji Sun*, 21 January 2017).

58 The program was extended in late 2016 with an additional \$20 million. Of course its success depended on retail hardware outlets being able to deliver the materials required. Evidence soon emerged that many were unable to deliver as promised, especially concrete blocks, roofing iron and timber (*Fiji Sun*, 5 August 2016; *Fiji Times*, 6 September 2016). Additionally, many areas were excluded from the first round of assistance and had to endure a long wait until the second round began at the end of 2016. A lack of documentation also frustrated tendering for school rebuilding, with deadlines for completion pushed back until October 2017. Until then students had to make do with tents (*Fiji Sun*, 23 December 2016).

59 *Fiji Times*, 9 & 22 March, 28 & 30 April 2016. Parliament rushed through a *False Information Act* in April 2016 to prevent abuse of cyclone assistance. By the end of May, some 22,100 homes had been assisted through the Help for Homes initiative. But the constant impact of withdrawals for education, housing, medical bills, unemployment and funeral costs from the \$5 billion FNPF meant that 75 per cent of its 403,316 members now had less than \$10,000 remaining in their pension accounts. Only 14 per cent had balances above \$50,000 (*Fiji Times*, 1 & 2 August, 13 October 2016). Its chair, Ajith Kodagoda, believed inadequate financial literacy misled 200,000 members into withdrawing funds after Winston and neglecting the consequences for their retirement (*Fiji Sun*, 1 March 2017).

June it reinforced its welfare credentials further, expanding poverty and pension schemes for the disadvantaged, and continuing medical, electricity and water subsidies to the poor.⁶⁰

Inevitably, politics entered reconstruction efforts. Bainimarama refused a SODELPA request to rebuild damaged churches. A secular state had of necessity to restore buildings and public infrastructure that benefited all Fijians; hence it would remain focused on homes, schools and health centres, and prioritise the provision of water and electricity services.⁶¹ Rabuka accused Bainimarama of deliberately fostering a culture of dependency that denied people the capacity to be resilient.⁶² Prasad called for an investigation into the two large hardware firms most responsible for long delays in providing materials under the Help for Homes initiative. They had accepted government money but apparently found it more profitable to export scarce materials than deliver them to cyclone victims. The government, Prasad claimed, failed to confirm their stocks prior to handing over money.⁶³ But, if anything, Cyclone Winston demonstrated – at least in the short term – both the government’s competence and its resolve to maintain its goals.⁶⁴ Certainly the World Bank celebrated its efforts, declaring it a model for the Pacific. The government’s individual lump sum of \$600 to 10 per cent of the population pumped nearly \$20 million into the economy in the three months following Winston, when pump-priming was most needed to keep the economy going.⁶⁵ Additionally, Fiji’s Rugby Sevens gold win at the Rio Olympic Games in August 2016 gave Fiji’s people and its government an important psychological boost, and a rare moment to come together to celebrate an historic achievement after such a difficult year.

60 Recovery after Winston (assisted by remittances and foreign aid) permitted the government to push on with expanding medical training and services, to plan the establishment of a new pilot training academy in association with Boeing and Airbus, to develop Nadi’s Black Rock military facility as a peacekeeping centre, to obtain special vehicles for disaster relief, to shift the target of infrastructure development from large projects to rural roads, bridges and wharves, and to increase its focus on education.

61 *Fiji Times*, 21 & 30 April 2016.

62 *Fiji Times*, 29 August 2016.

63 *Fiji Times*, 5 & 13 December 2016. The two companies were dropped from the second phase of the initiative and the Attorney-General threatened them with penalty and interest charges.

64 Sayed-Khaiyum, as Minister for Economy, drew attention to the work of the Construction and Implementation Unit within the ministry for progressing the rebuild and ‘building back better within budget’ (*Fiji Sun*, 21 January 2017).

65 *Fiji Sun*, 22 February 2017.

Nonetheless, dangers still lay ahead. At the end of 2016 the Reserve Bank revised GDP growth for the year down to 2 per cent, acknowledging both the greater damage Winston had inflicted on Fiji's cane belt, forests and aquaculture than originally supposed and the slow pace in rehabilitation efforts forced by crippling shortages in building materials and persistent wet weather.⁶⁶ Major flooding from a tropical depression at the end of 2016 inflicted further hardship on many of the same areas that Winston had hit. So, too, did an unexpectedly prolonged decline in tourism arrivals after Winston.⁶⁷ The Reserve Bank's GDP downgrade potentially threatened hopes for 3.8 per cent growth in 2017 and the government's boast of nine consecutive years of strong growth. A new \$840 million ADB and European Investment Bank loan in December 2016 for water supply and waste management in greater Suva promised to maintain the government's infrastructure drive, and the Attorney-General quickly reminded Fiji that Bainimarama's commitment to modernise Fiji for all Fijians, 'not just a select few', remained a core feature of his leadership.⁶⁸

Nonetheless, 2016 demonstrated FijiFirst's inability to anticipate external shocks to the economy. Growth could never be taken for granted and decline now might even embolden Fiji's opposition parties ahead of elections in 2018.⁶⁹ Any political or economic stumble could puncture FijiFirst's aura of invincibility. Hence the Attorney-General's concern at the end of 2016 to remind Fijians what FijiFirst had achieved.

66 *Fiji Times*, 17 November 2016.

67 *Fiji Times*, 13 December 2016. The tropical depression (TD04F) hit Ra hard; 66 per cent of Ra's river crossings were damaged by TD04F and Winston. The cost of repairs could only be sustained over several years. Cyclone Winston also had a long-term impact on tourism and, although tourist numbers rose during the year (principally from New Zealand and China), earnings in the September quarter were 10 per cent lower than in 2015. From November 2015 to November 2016 visitor arrivals rose 5 per cent, although Australian arrivals (50 per cent of the tourism market) fell 1.2 per cent. However, data for the year up until May 2017 suggested tourist numbers had increased 7.7 per cent (*Fiji Times*, 4 July 2017). Fiji Airways retained its plan for a new service to Adelaide in mid-2017, and with new resorts opening in 2017, Fiji still hoped to achieve one million tourist arrivals by 2020 (*Fiji Times*, 31 December 2016, 31 January 2017).

68 *Fiji Sun*, 10 December 2016.

69 Indeed, sociologist Tui Rakuita suggested that FijiFirst would struggle to retain the support it gained in 2014 because of substantial rebuild delays after Winston ('Analysing the polls', *Fiji Times*, 25 February 2017). The Tebutt-Times poll at the start of February gave FijiFirst only 37 per cent of the vote, compared with 13 per cent for SODELPA and one per cent for the NFP. Forty per cent of those polled remained undecided (*Fiji Times*, 26 February 2017).

It may seem a simple thing, but by establishing our shared identity as ‘Fijians’, the Constitution sent a clear message that every Fijian is equal under the law and equally entitled to the benefits of our nation’s progress. That mantra has driven the progress we have made over the past decade to reverse the years of discrimination that plagued Fijian society and stagnated our national development.⁷⁰

But for opposition parties, the past did not always appear so simple. Hence, Amnesty International’s report on torture in Fiji in mid-December 2016 provided an ideal opportunity for them to come together against FijiFirst. The report noted Bainimarama’s concession that beatings are ‘deeply engrained in parts of the Fijian psyche’, but argued that: ‘When the military is involved in policing matters, human rights violations are more likely to occur and they are less likely to be held accountable for their actions.’⁷¹ Immediately Draunidalo launched an attack on the decrees and immunity provisions inserted in the Constitution as a cause of Fiji’s dangerous culture of impunity. Silence reigned from her opposition colleagues, however, leaving an unchallenged Sayed-Khaiyum to declare the report selective and biased. Chief Justice Gates also reinforced Bainimarama’s claim that beatings were common long before 1987 and the coups. The report, he maintained, neither offered solutions nor acknowledged government responses.⁷²

Responsibility for the opposition’s paralysis lay in part with Rabuka’s resurrection. No sign existed by the end of 2016 that he could revitalise SODELPA or heal the differences within and between the parties to lead a united struggle against FijiFirst or at least enhance cooperation. SODELPA’s continued claim for preferential Taukei treatment risked the broader multicultural appeal it required to challenge FijiFirst, while Rabuka’s leadership created tensions, especially within the NFP, which

70 *Fiji Sun*, 8 December 2016. Bainimarama’s attendance at the launch of a dubious Instacharge app in late 2016 could have become such a stumble. Foreign media claimed he endorsed the app, which its promoters claimed enabled mobile phones to recharge within 30 seconds (*Guardian*, 3 December 2016), but local media only reported that he sought to spruik Fiji’s fast growing information and communications technology sector, now comprising 6 per cent of GDP (*Fiji Times*, 4 December 2016).

71 Amnesty International, *Beating Justice: How Fiji’s Security Forces Get Away with Torture*. London: 2016, pp. 4–5. Fiji ratified the UN Convention against Torture (CAT) in March 2016 and hosted a regional workshop on CAT at Natadola in October. It sought a seat on the UN Human Rights Council.

72 *Fiji Times*, 13 December 2016; *Fiji Sun*, 11 December 2016. The British government and the UNDP were working with Fiji to establish new procedures for interviewing prisoners.

could ultimately disadvantage both parties.⁷³ If anything, Rabuka's past haunted him: If we cannot work together, he argued, then any electoral victory against the government will be hollow, like Mahendra Chaudhry's in 1999 when opposition parties 'ganged up against the SVT, they won, and then they saw who the winner was ... They did not like it'. 'If we combine to defeat someone, then what?' he pondered.⁷⁴ Fiji's electoral landscape was reset in 2014, but political parties born from the struggles of a past era could not be remade.

Perspectives

Bainimarama's election victory in 2014 is now part of Fiji's history. But histories are of necessity confined by their parameters; the shorter the timeframe for analysis, the narrower their context. To some extent this effect is understandable, but it can distort perceptions. This study focuses only on Fiji's postcolonial years and, in particular, on a coup-riven period of nearly 30 years. That might seem a long time but, against Fiji's three millennia of human settlement, it is very short. We know very little about that greater epoch to enable valuable comparisons for contemporary studies. Only from the late 18th and 19th centuries, when the world began to envelop the Pacific islands, are Fiji's histories better understood, and their complexities suggest that it would be foolish to read into contemporary history the detail of what preceded. This, however, is precisely how many people do read their past, with the result that their reimagined 19th century has become the tempting tradition against which all change is judged; temptation being greatest when contemporary advantage is sought.

73 *Fiji Sun*, 23 & 24 December 2016. When Rabuka called for a united struggle against FijiFirst, he made clear that other opposition parties should recognise SODELPA's superior status. Their supporters should unite behind SODELPA (*Fiji Times*, 30 November 2016). That clearly did not accord with Draunidalo's preferences, and at the start of 2017 she quit as President of the NFP. SODELPA replaced Prasad as shadow Minister for Economy with its own Radrodro in July 2017 (*Fiji Times*, 10 July 2017). Rumours suggested she might join Waqavonovono's proposed Hope party. Meanwhile Rabuka began coalition talks with the Fiji Labour Party and its breakaway United Fiji Freedom Party. At the start of 2017, it is unclear whether the NFP will join in a coalition against FijiFirst or if sufficient common interests could sustain a coalition divided over so many issues (*Fiji Sun*, 28 January 2017). The formation of a new Unity Fiji Party in May 2017, along with the campaign ambitions of the People's Democratic Party, seemed to suggest that FijiFirst would find itself pitted against a very divided opposition in 2018 (*Fiji Sun*, 30 May 2017).

74 *Fiji Times*, 28 September 2016.

But the past is never so bound. Because we stand with one foot in the past and with the other reaching for the future, when we do look back or stare ahead, the perpetually changing present constantly challenges what we glimpse. Like ancient navigators on high seas, we seek a star to guide us. For many people in Fiji, the Constitutions have become their stars, with each new deviation scrutinised to ascertain distance from the original reference. But this way of viewing change can be misleading if it carries the assumption that the first reference point, a constitution embedded in the politics of communalism, represents a national lodestone with deep roots in an ancient past of Taukei order.

How, then, might we view Fiji, a country that is both clearly and simplistically the product of very different migratory histories: early settlement by Lapita Polynesians followed much later by waves of Melanesians from the Solomons and Vanuatu? To that mix we should add the influx of Tongans during the past three centuries, the distortions of early globalisation visited upon Fiji by trade, guns and disease, the rising power of Bau in the mid-19th century and the growing consolidation of political alliances. Bau's ambitions were in part thwarted by British colonialism although, thereafter, the Tongan-dominated Lau and small Bauan powerhouse found new ways to extend their influence as colonial allies. Consequently, a fundamentally different Taukei order under the rule of eastern chiefs and colonial officials quickly took shape in the late 19th century, characterised by the subjugation of Colo and the introduction of still more migrants, this time indentured labour from northern and southern India engaged to establish an economy on which colonial government could depend for income. This new order established the modern features of Taukei tradition: standardised language, Christianity, *mataqali* land ownership, consolidated village settlements and provincial identities, as well as stable chiefly governance, at the apex of which stood the newly created (Great) Council of Chiefs. Similar processes of change impacted on the fragmented Indian population; small-scale cane farming, urbanisation, education, political-industrial organisation, the withering of caste, and the immigration of a business class from Gujarat and Punjab began to produce a new IndoFijian community. The wider world had come to Fiji and transformed it beyond recognition.

Then, after nearly 100 years, a global wave of decolonisation caught up with Fiji, pushing colonial officials to conspire with leaders from both communities, which remained largely disparate, to establish an independent state. Their vision: to perpetuate chiefly influence by

positioning the Taukei against the country's most recent immigrants, whose labour had assisted to develop an economy that was the envy of Pacific island countries and – ironically – enabled the chiefly elite to retain its largely rural Taukei support base. The 1970 Constitution gave General Electors (Europeans, Chinese and people of mixed descent) the balance of power in the lower house of parliament but, in the upper house, the Taukei dominated, courtesy of GCC nominees. Communal democracy, however, possessed a crucial flaw; it worked only for as long as communal unity survived. For countries like Fiji embarking on a new adventure of independence and development in an increasingly globalised world, such unity could never be guaranteed, particularly since – given its very recent roots – no homogeneous communities existed outside of their political constructs.⁷⁵

Britain had form when it came to paying lip service to democracy in its former colonies, particularly those it had ruled over by fostering division. In Fiji's case, Britain's failure to transcend its own narrow colonial strategies cost the country dearly after 1970. True, Mara preached multiracialism and Fiji prospered in the brief flush of independence. But, by 1977, new economic realities set in and the communal dream soured with Sakeasi Butadroka's resistance to chiefly domination, rural neglect and the continued presence of IndoFijians. Fiji faltered. By 1982, Mara's multiracialism had become a protectionist façade. Enter Timoci Bavadra and his new Labour Party with an issues-based agenda in 1987 and the whole edifice crumbled as Rabuka and his military – itself a product of globalisation – swept them aside in the country's first military coup.

Rabuka sought to preserve the very interests Bavadra wanted to reform but, in doing so, he inadvertently transformed them in ways that ultimately weakened them further. Absolute Taukei paramountcy had always been the dream of Taukeists (although they disagreed on its form) but its

75 Brij Lal, 'Where has all the music gone? Reflections on the 40th anniversary of Fiji's independence', *Contemporary Pacific*, 23: 2, 2011, p. 416. Fiji has always been something of a Pacific melting pot, as its long history demonstrates. To disregard diversity by constructing the notion of a Taukei race or, for that matter, an IndoFijian race was always bound to turn out badly. Race is a social invention designed to cause division, as philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah reminds us in his 2016 BBC Reith Lectures, *Mistaken Identities* (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00729d9/episodes/guide). Madraiwiwi similarly argued that the notion that the Taukei could only protect their rights by maintaining racial unity 'is an arid concept conveniently used by politicians to advance their own interests and agendas'. He also argued that 'With the erosion of traditional structures and authority, pre-existing differences have begun to re-emerge' ('Ethnic tensions and the law', 2004). See also Ratuva ('Politics of ethno-national identity', 2008) for a discussion of the syncretic nature of communalism.

achievement removed the one element that fostered communal unity – the threat of IndoFijian political dominance. Hence Taukei differences quickly multiplied, energised by the provincial basis for Taukei politics enshrined in Rabuka's 1990 Constitution and by continued rural neglect. With party loyalty near impossible, dysfunction soon followed. Stung also by declining economic growth and rising poverty, Rabuka sought allies from his erstwhile IndoFijian rivals with a constitutional reset in 1997.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, it did no more than put icing on what remained fundamentally a communal cake. It could never escape the confrontational straitjacket communalism inflicted on Fiji's politics, as Taukei nationalists and rogue soldiers demonstrated again during George Speight's 2000 civilian coup when they seized parliament and launched raids across the country to keep out the IndoFijian-led People's Coalition government that Rabuka's unpopularity had inadvertently brought into power the previous year through a new voting system designed to promote cross-communal cooperation. Thus Fiji arrived at its second lost decade.

Of course it could be said that nothing in politics is certain. But, in 2000, this was not how many people in Fiji read their politics. Instead, stargazers asserted that Fiji had merely corrected its course, history had repeated itself, confirming a veritable coup cycle in 'Coup-Coup Land'. Once again the military stepped in, swept aside both the Coalition government and Speight's rebels, and handed power to a new alliance of Taukei politicians, business leaders and chiefs. Fiji's subsequent history might have been very different had its recently appointed military commander imposed on Fiji the wishes of the populist Speight and his clique of chiefly allies and military supporters. But he did not. Instead he allowed the re-establishment of what many Taukei viewed as the natural status quo. And yet, there was something very different about the ambitious Bainimarama that was not immediately apparent. He was no princeling or chief handed a leadership role in the military because of his status, as had been the case with some of his predecessors. He hailed from a province sceptical of the eastern chiefly elite. He struggled with army officers who disrespected his naval background or believed that they were more deserving of military leadership. He endured an assassination attempt during an unprecedented rebel mutiny in 2000. That background set him apart from the elite that

76 *Fiji Times*, 6 September 2016. Rabuka later claimed that his 1997 Constitution returned constitutional power to the people. But while processes of consultation have varied considerably, no constitution in Fiji has ever been put to the popular vote.

he restored to power, a separation that became ever more apparent each time it sought to accommodate the former rebels. In the end, alienation and ambition transformed separation into divorce.

Despite superficial appearances, Fiji's fourth coup in late 2006 differed from its predecessors. Bainimarama sought to avoid Rabuka's mistakes after 1987 by maintaining the levers of power and the Constitution. Even when left no choice but to abrogate the Constitution nearly three years later, he refused to rush into a new constitution. Instead he began to transform elements of Fiji: Taukei deference to tradition, the provision of golden eggs to sustain the old elite, the power enjoyed by the media and judiciary, rural neglect and infrastructural inertia. And he brazenly navigated international hostility to his illegal regime. Then, having accepted an independent process for developing a new constitution, he rejected its outcome, fearing it threatened his hold on power and would restore much of what he had undone. Instead he reset electoral rules, abolishing communalism in order to remove the base of the old elite and to provide Fiji's people a non-communal foundation for voting. This, Steven Ratuva and Stephanie Lawson argue, brought Fiji's political system – for the first time in its history – closer to the standard model of liberal democracy.⁷⁷

Government still remained the familiar goose but, this time, its golden eggs were distributed more equally than before through lease monies that now bypassed chiefly hands; through welfare and educational programs that were no longer racially determined; and through massive public road, water and electrification projects. True – like Mara, Rabuka and Qarase – Bainimarama had cronies, and the military continued to benefit excessively from his ascendancy. But Bainimarama's outstanding controversial achievement remains undoubtedly his rebooting of Fiji's operating system in 2013. Gone were the single-member electorates favouring rural areas and Fiji's aristocrats. Instead, to paraphrase Scott MacWilliam, he marginalised the 'indigenous buccaneers' who used the 'screen of identity' to justify their access to state assets and power.⁷⁸ Rabuka had once pondered just such an outcome:

77 Steven Ratuva & Stephanie Lawson, 'The people have spoken', in Ratuva & Lawson, *The People Have Spoken: The 2014 Elections in Fiji*. Canberra: ANU Press, 2016, p. 2.

78 Scott MacWilliam, "'Not with a bang but a whimper": SODELPA and the 2014 elections', in Ratuva & Lawson, *The People Have Spoken*, 2016, p. 217.

hopefully we can introduce certain policies and systems in which we can work at getting our chiefs into an effective ruling group, not to the extent that they rule the politics of the nation, but they rule their own little *vanuas* and the divisions of the *vanua* effectively, capable of understanding the modern democratic systems that we now live in.⁷⁹

But he could never bring himself to realise it. Restoring multiracialism in 1997 remained his sole achievement.

In essence, Bainimarama had become Bavadra Mark II, returned as a military avenger, and that difference goes some way to explain the cost of Fiji's misadventure. From late 2006 until September 2014, Bainimarama and his government rode roughshod over human rights, legal and constitutional systems, business rights and media freedoms, acts Bavadra would never have contemplated or endorsed.⁸⁰ His was a military dictatorship that transformed itself into what MacWilliam calls a 'militarised democracy', albeit an unreconstructed military subject to none of the equal opportunity reforms imposed on Fiji.⁸¹ How that democracy performs and survives remains yet to be seen.⁸² It helps that the dividing line is, at least officially, no longer communal, as Ratuva and Lawson note,⁸³ and as the Attorney-General emphasises:

When politicians are elected through an electoral system that divides society on the basis of ethnicity, it encourages an ethnic way of thinking and incentivises ethnic favouritism. Racism has been at the base of Fiji society since Colonial times, and it has always been used as a means to preserve the power and influence of the elites. When Fijians are homogenised into groups on the basis of ethnicity, we are unable to address intragroup injustices, such as gender, economic participation and socioeconomic rights. Government's work is therefore focused on those Fijians on the margins of society. We are using the promotion of socioeconomic rights to overcome the racist paradigm that has been used by the elites to withhold resources and opportunities for the rest of society.⁸⁴

79 *Islands Business*, July 1991.

80 Some readers may object to the comparison, but Bainimarama and Bavadra shared much in common: both objected to the focus on race, they wanted all citizens to be called Fijians, they wanted to democratise Fijian institutions, and they wanted greater equalisation in the distribution of wealth.

81 MacWilliam, "Not with a bang but a whimper", 2016, pp. 225–26.

82 Politics academic Sandra Tarte believes that, while 'coup leaders may be the enemy of democracy ... they can also reinvent themselves as its strongest ally' ('What Rabuka's return means for Fijian politics', *eastasiaforum.org*, 5 August 2016).

83 Steven Ratuva & Stephanie Lawson, 'Concluding note: the election to end all coups', in Ratuva & Lawson, *The People Have Spoken*, 2016, pp. 278–79.

84 *Fiji Sun*, 8 December 2016. Comments made during a meeting on contemporary forms of racism and intolerance with the UN Special Rapporteur, Matuma Ruteere, in Suva.

But Sayed-Khaiyum's promotion of what he sees as Bainimarama's most impressive achievement overlooks the greatest challenge to his legacy, namely the legitimacy of the new parliamentary system, and in particular – to quote Ratuva and Lawson again – that it becomes 'integral to a democratic political culture and is accepted by all'. They argue that extra parliamentary processes have been painful and destructive, leaving Fiji desperately in need of greater democratic space. Means are as important as ends and can also have a lasting impact if a sense of victimhood generates a cycle of vengeance and counter vengeance.⁸⁵

Jon Fraenkel makes a similar point. Fiji may not be 'a consolidated semi-authoritarian state', but it remains politically highly fragile: 'Much of its present orientation depends on the prime minister and his attorney general'. Without them, 'Fiji would probably change direction', Fraenkel argues, assuming of course that the military permits change.⁸⁶ Rabuka directly acknowledged that dilemma in late 2016, as we noted earlier: 'If we combine to defeat someone, then what?'⁸⁷ Hence the importance of FijiFirst reaching out to Opposition parties rather than playing the politics of respect, bringing them along on the journey and, above all, providing them a stake in a constitutional reset.

At the close of 2016, Fiji's longest reigning public intellectual, Wadan Narsey, outlined what that journey might involve in 2017, a series of much-needed constitutional changes: an end to the 5 per cent threshold which (he argues) disenfranchises candidates and mocks the notion of one person – one vote – one value, the reintroduction of constituencies to restore MP accountability to electorates, the addition of a closed-list system to ensure proportionality and raise the number of women in parliament, the use of party symbols on ballot boxes, the removal of government control over the Election Office, Electoral Commission and the Media Industry Development Authority, and the removal of legislation and decrees that discourage the media from performing its watchdog role. For the sake of future generations, Narsey argues, mere tinkering will not suffice.⁸⁸ No process as formal as he suggests, however,

85 Ratuva & Lawson, 'Concluding note', 2016, pp. 275–77. As Vice President, Madraiwiwi had similarly argued that 'Diversity is a strength rather than a weakness' but, to gain from it, Fiji needed 'a practical vision of how to affirm and strengthen diversity in the context of uniting the nation' ('Challenges and opportunities in Fiji today', *fjilive*, 20 April 2006). Only engagement would succeed.

86 Jon Fraenkel, 'In the Pacific, two cheers for democracy', *Inside Story*, 13 December 2016.

87 *Fiji Times*, 28 September 2016.

88 Wadan Narsey, 'Critical issues for 2017', 2016.

has emerged since 2014. Instead, Opposition leaders have been harassed for attending a constitutional forum⁸⁹ and Prasad has been left bemoaning the lack of a middle ground and questioning whether democracy is really working in Fiji. Military dictatorship, he believes, has simply transformed itself into parliamentary dictatorship.⁹⁰

How different might Fiji be today had Rabuka accepted Bavadra's legitimacy in 1987? Lawyer Richard Naidu once remarked 'that Fiji would have been a better place, with a better vision, if the doctor [Bavadra] had been allowed to see out his shift'.⁹¹ Of course we will never know how the confines of communalism would have played out under Bavadra. But we do know what Rabuka's actions ultimately cost Fiji in terms of political and economic misadventure, and more. Economically, according to Narsey, the coups have cost Fiji some \$10 billion between 1987 and 2010. This equates to about two years' GDP, or two years' income for every household and company, an effective decline in GDP of 30 per cent. This, he argues, 'is not just a failure on the part of our political and military leaders, but a failure of the populace at large'.⁹² Indeed, Narsey notes, the coups have left Fiji 'morally gutted, from the top down' and, because people turned a blind eye to corruption, treason and injustice, a silence now enshrouds the country.⁹³ Back in 2005, the former deputy director of public prosecutions, Peter Ridgway, wrote:

The silent majority in Fiji is too big. Too many people are comfortable making a quid and not wanting to rock the boat. Too many people see themselves as powerless to change things but they are not. Public opinion is a most powerful motivator for all government to behave ethically. I don't think Fiji understands the importance of participation in their own democracy. My message to Fiji is: it is your democracy, use it.⁹⁴

89 On 5 September 2016, Chaudhry, Prasad and Rabuka attended a Pacific Dialogue forum on the 2013 Constitution. Five days later, they and organiser Jone Dakuvula, unionist Attar Singh, and SODELPA's Tupeni Baba were arrested and detained for two days by police for attending a forum held without a police permit. Eventually the director of public prosecutions refused to proceed with the case, arguing that the arrests had been highly selective (*Fiji Sun*, 18 October 2016). Police also shut down a three-day Sugar Forum at the Pearl Fiji Resort in Pacific Harbour in early September because its organisers had similarly gained no permit.

90 *Fiji Times*, 16 & 30 January 2016, 4 June 2016.

91 Griffen, *With Heart and Nerve and Sinew*, 1997, p. 356.

92 Wadan Narsey, 'Costly coups: No catching up', *Fiji Times*, 11 December 2007.

93 Wadan Narsey, 'The moral gutting of Fiji and coming economic collapse: To raise our voices as one', narseyonfiji.wordpress.com, 13 July 2009.

94 Peter Ridgway, 'Use your democracy', *Sunday Sun*, 26 July 2005.

The late Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi similarly argued that ‘Ultimately the best guarantor of the rule of law is not the State and the branches which comprise it but the recognition by people of its value and their willingness to fight for and uphold it’.⁹⁵ Lawyer Graham Leung also had his own take on Fiji’s contemporary misadventure:

The real problem in Fiji is feudal cliques refusing to relinquish power, an army that refuses to recognise its limitations in a democracy, and failed politicians of all persuasions and opportunistic businessmen who support them, see nothing wrong in undermining electoral verdicts.⁹⁶

That may still be Fiji’s future, unless Bainimarama’s government works hard to combine economic and social reforms with greater democratic space for popular voices. The 2012 FCC draft Constitution proposed such a space and its rejection has given Fiji’s democracy the potential for more authoritarian practices. ‘At the end of the day, democracy and pluralism are fragile human experiments,’ the London-based historian Sunil Khilnani warns, ‘and they are also very easy to destroy.’⁹⁷ Reforming the 2013 Constitution, without returning to its mythical communal lodestone, now remains Fiji’s greatest challenge and it is one that the Bainimarama government should proactively address, rather than push its divided opposition parties into constitutional confrontation. Similarly, alienating business leaders and cane farmers by failing to consult about important reform initiatives can needlessly transform allies into enemies ahead of elections when democratic support from many fronts will be required.⁹⁸ And, when that day comes, as inevitably it will, Fiji’s future prosperity and stability will be better assured if all parties and all Fiji’s people accept the cosmopolitan basis of Bainimarama’s 2013 reset and not resort to identity politics.

95 Madraiwiwi, ‘Ethnic tensions and the law’, 2004. He added: ‘Until that point is reached, the journey to it must be seen and appreciated for what it is. In a society such as ours where divisions exist both inter-ethnically and within communities, the process of nation-building of which the rule of law is an integral part, requires a deft balancing of priorities in a fair and inclusive manner. This allows everyone to be part of the challenge that we need to face together’.

96 *Australian*, 7 May 2009.

97 *BBC*, 15 March 2016; the director of London’s India Institute reflecting on India’s moment for change and the need for leaders to take a long view.

98 The *Fair Reporting of Credit Act* and the Sugar Cane Industry Bill are examples where the government has allegedly failed to consult adequately prior to legislating reforms, thus creating the impression that it remains in its pre-election decree mode (Neelesh Gounder, ‘Elective dictatorship’, *Fiji Times*, 7 May 2016; Richard Naidu, ‘True democracy and the cost of credit’, *Fiji Times*, 30 April 2016).

Speaking of an earlier opportunity 'to develop a new paradigm and ways of doing things', Madraiwiwi believed such moments rare in Fiji's collective experience. '*Kunekune na yaloka ni dilio* is a Fijian expression that captures the essence,' he argued. It refers to a bird so adept at hiding her eggs that they are mostly never found. 'Having found the egg on this occasion,' he asked, 'what are we going to do with it? The choice is ours to make.'⁹⁹

But the bird also deserves attention. There is always the danger that, without reform, a time will come when Fiji's leaders find not only their much-coveted eggs missing or broken but Rabuka's bird well and truly cooked.

99 Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, 'Making the right choices', 2006.

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