

Introduction

His admirers said he was a charismatic leader with a dazzling smile, a commoner following an ancient tradition of warrior service on behalf of an indigenous people who feared marginalisation at the hands of ungrateful immigrants. One tourist pleaded with him to stage a coup in her backyard; in private parties around the capital, Suva, infatuated women whispered ‘coup me baby’ in his presence. It was so easy to overlook the enormity of what he had done in planning and implementing Fiji’s first military coup, to be seduced by celebrity, captivated by the excitement of the moment, and plead its inevitability as the final eruption of long-simmering indigenous discontent. A generation would pass before the consequences of the actions of Fiji’s strong man of 1987, Sitiveni Rabuka, would be fully appreciated but, by then, the die had been well and truly cast. The Major General did not live happily ever after. No nirvana followed the assertion of indigenous rights. If anything, misadventure became his country’s most enduring contemporary trait.

Rabuka understood from the very beginning that the path he took in overthrowing a new and democratically elected government on 14 May 1987 might ultimately prove his undoing, and not only for logistical reasons. Assertions of racial exclusivity or supremacy hung uneasily in a world that was still mired in post-fascist politics. Globalisation and its accessory, multiculturalism, had yet to be fully comprehended, let alone embraced globally, not that his followers paid much attention to how the world viewed their actions.

Rabuka declared himself the saviour of tradition in a country whose indigenous peoples still saw themselves as respectfully hierarchical. Democracy threatened that feature because it threatened the paramouncy

of what they held to be indigenous interests;¹ it threatened Fijianness and the traditional relationships that Fijianness entailed. This was justification enough, and Fiji's first coup followed this script. Soon after, the country's traditional chiefs met and returned leadership to the Fijian elite who had ruled the country since independence in 1970. There the matter might have rested, perhaps uncomfortably for a time but, nonetheless, with inevitable finality. Unfortunately for its architects, political actions tend to promote unintended consequences that are less easily dismissed.

Rabuka came to power by overthrowing a democratically elected government that many Fijians viewed as illegitimate because the basis of its power lay predominantly with the votes of the descendants of Indian migrants. But he did so by first overthrowing his own military commander, a high-ranking Fijian chief. Within five months, he would also turn his overwhelmingly Fijian military machine against the same chiefs to whom he had initially entrusted power. He believed that they were about to cut a deal with the very politicians he had overthrown, leaving him out in the cold and possibly exposed to charges of treason. This unscripted intervention, however, brought its own difficulties.

Declaring Fiji a republic could not hide for long the fact that the military was not itself well positioned to seize control. Nonetheless, this second coup set the scene for a new and prolonged confrontation with the Fijian elite, even after Rabuka changed his mind three months into his second coup and restored the Fijian elite to power and delivered a new constitution heavily weighted in its favour. When solely communal elections were finally held in 1992, Rabuka emerged as the country's first elected, republican prime minister. For commoners like himself, democracy enabled a more meaningful future. But the experience took its toll. Within a short time

1 The 'indigenous' peoples of Fiji, the *Taukei*, have until recently called themselves Fijian, a description derived from assuming ownership of the country's name, itself reputedly derived from the Tongan pronunciation of Viti (*Fisi*). Until 2010, no other communities in the country (including the equally indigenous Rotumans) were permitted to use the national name to describe themselves; instead, they were identified solely by ethnicity, although, in the case of peoples deemed Indians, it is a national rather than ethnic description that is used. The decision to democratise Fiji's national name in 2010 addressed one longstanding grievance held mainly by non-indigenous citizens but overlooked the issue of indigeneity, the definition of which in Fiji never fully aligned with that accepted by the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, which describes peoples who not only have continuity with precolonial society and also belong to non-dominant sectors of society. In Fiji since independence, the *Taukei* have always been politically dominant. With that ambiguity in mind, I will use the standard naming conventions of the periods where possible, and refer to the *Taukei* (or *iTaukei*) as Fijians until 2010. Similarly, I will describe the migrant community as Indians until independence, thereafter as IndoFijians.

he would learn that democracy is best practiced by reaching consensus with all of a country's citizens. In other words, apartheid and aristocratic privilege could not form the basis for the economic growth and prosperity everyone craved, especially the Fijian people on whose behalf he claimed to act in 1987.

Reaching that point proved difficult, not least because accommodating his country's marginalised minorities and introducing a new democratic power-sharing constitution in 1997 meant challenging everything he had at one time stood for, including his popular support base. Rabuka would not be the first political leader to discover that hero status has a short shelf life. More importantly, he would learn that there were others less persuaded of the value of his transformation who would seek to emulate his past and, in time, earn his country the epithet 'Coup-Coup Land'.

The Rabuka legacy was not confined to military coups. It also ensured that democratisation assumed limited economic characteristics. In part this was both a colonial and postcolonial legacy but it was also a contemporary defensive mechanism. Rabuka could only avoid the personal consequences of his actions and maintain control over the levers of power by prioritising the growth of his military, buying elite support with access to state resources, paying off cronies and increasing the roles of traditional chiefs. Despite the politically important rhetoric of affirmative action for Fijians, these political priorities meant paying lip service to economic and social development for the mass of his people. For those of Indian descent, at best it meant neglect.

Coups are by their nature fixed firmly on control of the state as their primary prize. Hence they are unlikely to weaken the centrality of the state in economic and social life. Despite some attempts after 1987 to suggest a new and determinedly postcolonial economic trajectory, Fiji's early coups were far from revolutionary. If anything they were backward-looking, embracing a false memory of peaceful communal harmony and order but with one important difference: the colonial era was over, government had been restored to Fijian leadership. That was the central purpose of the coups and it would remain the *raison d'être* of post-coup administrations. There were limits, then, to what ordinary Fijians could expect from the restoration, as Rabuka told an Australian journalist in 1988:

Fijian people will have the political say in their country and [a constitution to] safeguard their birthright, their land, their forests, the minerals and things; but not one that would make them so strong that they do not need a central government.²

In other words, authority would never be decentralised, civil society would always face constraints and development would continue to be bureaucratically led, as it had been ever since the country's high chiefs and colonial authorities had created the golden age of Fijian administration back in the 1940s. The legacy of its chief architect, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, was honoured from that time on, and Rabuka never had any intention of challenging it, even if sometimes when out of favour with the chiefs – and, in particular, Sukuna's protégé, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara – he articulated the frustration it engendered in neglected commoners. Central government should never be challenged, he reminded a group of Fijian trade unionists in 1991. It was 'the goose that lays the golden egg'.³ But for whom did the goose lay its golden egg? Clearly not ordinary Fijians; at least, not those who subsisted in rural villages and certainly not those who increasingly flocked to urban slums looking for work. There were limits to what they could expect if hierarchies of administration and power were to be respected.

This view, while not originating with Rabuka, had tremendous repercussions for the small state. Fiji might have the largest and most diversified economy among the independent island states of the south-west Pacific, but its economic performance over the next two decades served only to promote emigration and spiralling poverty. It added to the background dissatisfaction that Fijian rivals would employ to challenge Rabuka electorally in May 1999 and to mount their own 'civilian' coup one year later against the political coalition that they had inadvertently caused to succeed him. The coup could not succeed without military backing, but it did enable the formation of a new post-Rabuka political force that, over the next six years, would achieve the kind of Fijian political unity Rabuka had only been able to dream of, in part by reaching accommodation with supporters of the abortive 2000 coup. Yet, in terms of economic strategy, it was essentially Fijian Paramountcy 101, the post-1987 strategy reasserted and with a similarly narrow group of Fijian beneficiaries who were intent on capturing for themselves what wealth remained to be squeezed from the nation.

2 R Foley, 'Rabuka says interim government a "sideshow"'. *Canberra Times*, 11 August 1988.

3 *Fiji Times*, 6 May 1991.

In itself, this did not doom the government, which won fresh elections in 2006 and finally made significant overtures to its parliamentary opposition by forming a multi-party cabinet as the 1997 Constitution had intended. Multiracial accommodation now seemed possible. But the coup attempt in 2000 left another, less easily resolved legacy in exposing deep fractures within the military that, within months of the coup's resolution, exploded into a bloody mutiny designed to remove the military commander, Frank Bainimarama, and restart the coup. The mutiny collapsed but, from that moment in November 2000, the Commander became increasingly intolerant of the government he had put in place and especially of its efforts to accommodate those responsible for the 2000 coup, against which he publicly campaigned. An increasingly shaky multi-party cabinet and continued controversy over affirmative action programs provided his officers with additional ammunition to question the direction of the Fiji state and to launch its 'coup to end all coups' in December 2006.

Unfortunately, like all coups, the immediate impact of this fourth coup simply made long-term planning more difficult. Its economic consequences proved as disastrous for the beleaguered nation as those experienced nearly 20 years before. It further debilitated already weakened state institutions and it bitterly divided once-thriving civil organisations. Despite fluid promises to introduce transformative constitutional changes, the military consolidated its role as the nation's final political arbiter, leaving citizens to wonder at the state in which they would find Fiji by the time they emerged from the glare of elections in 2014 to survey their new democratic landscape.

This is a story of those tumultuous years, but of course it cannot be a story solely of Fiji. The events that occurred in Fiji did not take place within a vacuum. Instead they are part and parcel of the human story that is every bit as connected to the world as any other national story. This is not to deny the uniqueness of the Fiji experience, but to view it in terms of the broader stories of which it forms as essential an example as that from any other nation. Fijians exist because they derive from a wider set of Pacific migrations and interactions that began over 6,000 years ago far away in the South China Sea. During the 19th century, their diverse descendants were enveloped by the global reach of European economic, social and political activities, their peoples Christianised and their social structures transformed. For the first time they became Fijians, rather than Lauans or Kai Colo, although those late precolonial identities persisted, at least

for political purposes, in the contemporary era.⁴ Any form of identity, whether based on race, religion or nation, is a social invention. Becoming a British colony from 1874 further deepened change: new political structures and a colonial economy based on sugar and the labour of imported Indians, whose own country had been even more transformed as a result of British conquest. Fijian chiefs fought to retain some measure of control over their people and were accommodated in so far as the colonial system of indirect rule proved effective in maintaining order. But historically, accommodation was short lived; during the 1960s the global anti-colonial 'wind of change' swept also across the Pacific and, from late 1970, Fiji found itself an independent Third World nation, active on the world stage in pursuing postcolonial agreements on trade access and sugar, the law of the sea and peacekeeping duties for an increasingly pressed United Nations.

Fiji may be a small and relatively insignificant Pacific island compared with large Pacific rim countries, but it is nonetheless just as integrated into the globalised world of aid, education and training, health, labour, media, militaries, migration, mining, non-government organisations (NGOs), politics, religion, regions, tourism, trade, transport and unions; the list is endless. It might seem odd today that a country that is so successful in utilising global opportunities for the benefit of its people has been so undermined by insular introspection.⁵ But, in the age of Donald Trump and Brexit, we should more easily recognise Fiji as an unexceptional example of humanity, one whose study offers insights just as useful for understanding our world as that of any society. Of course Fiji has not always been seen in this way. We often fail to look beyond superficial differences or at what appears unique. This is an examination of those perceptions and of the kind of society Fiji has become.

Central to an examination of both are notions of development and modernity. We sometimes patronisingly assume that development is a concern only for countries seeking to catch up with already 'developed' countries. Indeed, since the Second World War, modernising and

4 These older identities are increasingly undone by the fluid movement of Fijian (Taukei) people as they marry, raise children and work across the country (and beyond), outside old physical, ethnic and political boundaries. In that sense, Fijians have themselves again become more diverse.

5 The former judge and Fiji Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi once argued that 'Those who wish to turn back the clock or shake their fist at the outside world are an endangered species. There is no ... turning back'. The aspirations of the young 'can only be fulfilled pursuant to engagement with the world at large on its own terms' ('Ethnic tensions and the law', *Fiji Times*, 25 September 2004).

collectively improving society has become a central goal of almost all societies, and a vast array of multilateral and international civil organisations now exists to assist states to achieve economic growth or direct attention to human and social development. But, this focus should not seduce us into overlooking the reality that development concerns all societies, however they rank themselves globally. It is the shifting character of development debates, from basic infrastructure and social wellbeing to issues concerning ageing populations, changing technologies, economic competitiveness, inequalities and climate change that shapes perceptions in ways that often obscures commonality.

If we were able to return to the early 19th century, when a quickly evolving industrial revolution created the most dramatic changes human societies have ever faced, we might be less inclined to view development in binary terms. Many of the features of what was once called Third World development were then in evidence as people sought to reconstruct states and systems of governance to cope with the stresses of change and their consequences for regional balances of power. At that time, development came to be conceived of as progress, and its leaders took great pride in asserting that it denoted also national or racial superiority, using it to justify acts of aggression against neighbours or distant peoples. What we sometimes call the age of colonialism or imperialism, a time which not only saw the world carved up between a few leading industrial nations but also afflicted by devastating wars, was simply one manifestation of the desire to actively develop and change societies. And, for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, notions of fitness and human evolution were used to justify either the occupation and incorporation of whole societies or the rapid expansion of inequalities within societies. Development, always universal, carries with it tremendous baggage.

Part of that baggage is our tendency to dichotomise the world. How easily comparisons such as First World–Third World, developed–developing, north–south, East–West, tradition and modernity roll off our tongues, encapsulating generalisations and stereotypes that have long since lost their validity, if indeed they ever held any. In addition, nation-building responses to industrialisation over the past two centuries have also led us to regard nations as essentially natural homogenised units, to neglect or suppress evidence of internal diversity, and to reify culture and modernity. Consequently, we still tend to believe that homogeneity is an essential element for successful development, with the result that we fail to accommodate diversity within our models for growth.

Contemporary globalisation renders failure more dangerous. One only has to listen to debates on multiculturalism and migration to appreciate the continued strength of attachment to perceived national norms. Because many developing countries were created with attention to essentialised differences rather than national norms, their inability to successfully pursue the development examples purportedly set by the early industrialising countries, those we often misleadingly describe as the West, has been attributed – over the past half century or more – to their plurality or lack of cohesion. The argument becomes more convoluted still if we claim that the basis of Western development lies in free markets and democracy, something that most Western countries never enjoyed until recently. In other words, these features were products of development, not its prerequisites.

Democracy is an excellent case in point that is often held to be the result of a peculiarly Western cultural inheritance traced back to classical Greece or the English Magna Carta. This interpretation obscures the complex social and economic struggles that made different forms of democracy possible, a triumph of mass society and the growing middle-class nature of developing societies. This feature is evident also in Fiji. Democracy was never a historical feature of European societies or something that grew naturally from their past. Many only became democratic after 1945 and some have only experimented with democratic institutions since 1989. Even the United States only extended democratic rights to all its adult citizens in 1965, Australia in 1967.⁶

6 Kwame Anthony Appiah makes a similar case in relation to the notion of the West really only having assumed its modern meaning with the Cold War. People, Appiah argues, believe that an identity that survives must be propelled by some potent common essence. In the case of the West, that essence hung around a grand narrative about Greek democracy, the Magna Carta and the Copernican revolution, and a culture that became individualistic, democratic, liberal-minded and tolerant, progressive, rational and scientific. Of course, finding evidence for such a common culture across premodern Europe or even 20th-century Europe is impossible. It did not exist. Consequently, claims Appiah, we need to abandon the idea of an organic whole for a more cosmopolitan one. Every element of culture is separable, and open for adoption by anyone. Values are not a birthright; instead, they are choices that people need to make, 'not tracks laid down by ... destiny'; 'Culture – like religion and nation and race – provides a source of identity for contemporary human beings. And, like all three, it can become a form of confinement, conceptual mistakes underwriting moral ones. Yet all of them can also give contours to our freedom.' Hence social identities can expand our horizons beyond our small-scale lives, even to the global human level. But our local lives still need to make sense ('There is no such thing as Western civilisation', *Guardian*, 9 November 2016).

Of course difference can always be used to rationalise pathways and institutions that are markedly dissimilar to the norms of many comparatively wealthy countries today. Invariably such arguments amount to little more than political point scoring. Development is not a Western project. The goals of development and the circumstances under which it occurs constantly change. At one time development was simply a state project. Today it is far more diverse, enveloping everything from the individual to regions.

It is important to understand the fluid nature of human relationships and development. Nothing is homogeneous or static. Everything interacts and is in constant flux. Under such circumstances, dichotomies do not describe reality, only perceptions of reality. We might look at subsistence farmers and regard them as traditional, but how traditional are they if they also produce for an urban market, make use of motorised transportation, and possess mobile phones to mobilise market data?

Globalisation introduces another dynamic that confounds narrow readings of the past and understandings of change. By fostering novel relationships, it has enabled new ways of seeing the world that prioritise human empowerment. It is this agenda that is often perceived as a threat to 'traditional' powerholders who fuel the modernity–tradition dichotomy for self-serving purposes. Thus globalisation, democracy and contemporary social movements have more in common than many people realise. Rather than assume a dichotomy between modernity and tradition, we might better argue that almost all societies are modern because they are all engaged – however unequally – with a globalised world. In this respect, Fiji serves as a useful example.

Modern Fiji in 1970 confronted development through the lens of race and privilege. When development failed to satisfy Fijian expectations and constitutional paramountcy tempered by multiracialism failed the privileged elite, Fiji's coup season began with Rabuka's 1987 attempts to mandate absolute Fijian dominance. When they too failed to deliver economic transformation, Fiji restored multiracialism in 1997, hoping that communal electoral reform alone might compensate for its development biases. That initiative was, however, doomed by two responses. First, a civilian coup in 2000, which swept aside a multiracial government and, through the military, reinstated the country's elite to power; and, second, a military coup in 2006 that rejected the communal basis for multiracialism and sought to address the biases inherent in Fiji's

development strategies. That latter coup has, to date, endured; following elections in 2014, Bainimarama emerged as prime minister, leading a new multiracial party that overwhelmingly dominates the new parliament. But a weakened and confused iteration of the old party of the Fijian or Taukei elite survived. In an echo of the past, it would soon be led by the very man who had first sought to transform Fiji by military means – a resurrected and much older Rabuka, a man now haunted by his past.

This, then, is the story of Fiji's prolonged contemporary misadventure and its impact on the south-west Pacific's leading island state.

This text is taken from *The General's Goose: Fiji's Tale of Contemporary Misadventure*, by Robbie Robertson, published 2017 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.