

Preface

In 1979, a young New Zealand graduate, who had just completed a PhD thesis on government responses to the Great Depression in New Zealand, arrived in Suva to teach at the University of the South Pacific. Everything about Fiji and the university challenged that graduate's limited understanding of the world and offered a steep learning curve that ultimately transformed his academic and personal life. The result has been a fascinating educative journey, sometimes tumultuous but always rewarding. Now, at the end of that journey, it is time to take stock of what he has learned and to bring his story of Fiji up to date.

Histories are invariably partisan, which is one reason they are always rewritten. Their biases derive from the status of their authors (are they insiders or outsiders?), the sources used and the ideologies conveyed. None of these biases necessarily determine whether the result is good history or bad history; that derives almost solely from the quality of the work produced. But biases can also be time-bound. Early histories of Fiji were invariably captured by the prevailing colonial ethos and, later, by its postcolonial antithesis.¹ Across both perspectives strode the spectre of race, which came to dominate many interpretations of Fiji during and after the 1980s when military interventions added yet another dimension to Fiji's troubled history. Understanding these transformative dimensions is a central goal of the first two parts of this book. Fiji's contemporary history, however, slid into uncharted territory after its military crushed a populist revolt in 2000. On this occasion, neither colonial nor postcolonial explanations sufficed, nor crude references to racial divides. Instead attention shifted to the military and its radical transformation from indigenous Fijian protector to multiracial enforcer.

1 Two contrasting examples are RA Derrick's *A History of Fiji* (Suva: Government Press, 1950) and Jai Narayan's *The Political Economy of Fiji* (Suva: South Pacific Review Press, 1984).

The second two parts of this book tell the complex story of that uneasy and messy transformation and its impact on democracy within Fiji, with a conclusion examining post-2014 politics until 2017.

For many people, Fiji is simply a typical Third World basket case. For those who journey to Fiji from Australasia, North America and Asia for restful holidays, Fiji remains an uncomplicated small South Pacific island paradise. Of course it is neither. As one of the most developed Pacific states, Fiji strides the South Pacific islands as a colossus. It is a regional hub for travel and trade. It possesses outstanding infrastructure for tourism and education, and its economy is increasingly diversified. But, like any country, success depends ultimately on the quality of leadership. In this regard Fiji has suffered most. Partisan interests that are prepared to exploit populist and identity divisions for political and economic gain have often captured its leadership. Hence, the story of Fiji is a human one, rather than an exceptional one, but no less relevant as a consequence.

Too many people, especially colleagues and friends in Fiji and beyond, have assisted me over the years to mention them all here, but one who does stand out for helping me (the imperfect student) most to understand the intricacies of Fiji and for enduring my frequent absences (both real and virtual) is my wife, Jita. To her I owe an enduring debt of love and gratitude for a life well lived and shared.

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