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Exile and a land of memory: Brij V. Lal, Indo-Fijian scholar activist¹

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You can muffle the drum, and you can loosen
the strings of the lyre.

But who shall command the skylark not to sing.

— Khalil Gibran²

Kevin Chen was a postgraduate student at The Australian National University when he wrote the present chapter as an assignment for another course. The substance of his original paper is intact except for some minor stylistic changes and prudent pruning to remove repetition. He is a Malaysian citizen now working on strategic issues there. A transcript of the interview is deposited at The Australian National University along with my papers.

I first met Professor Lal—or Brij as he insists on being called—some years ago when I was doing a Masters in Asia Pacific Studies at The Australian National University. One course organised by Dr Mary Kilcline Cody regularly invited guest lecturers to the class. Brij gave one such lecture

1 Originally appeared in *Fijian Studies* 14(2) (2016): 143–59.

2 Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1923; Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), p. 27.

and I remember it vividly. He walked into the lecture room in Coombs Extension 1.04, a shortish man with a greying head of hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He was wearing thick black-rimmed glasses and a tweed jacket with elbow patches to boot, the quintessential professorial attire for a Canberra winter. Head down and his hands clasped behind his back, he slowly paced the front of the room as he was introduced. You somehow sensed that he was a practised performer.

‘Fiji is a four-letter word,’ he began. We were all slightly taken aback by this abrupt, unaccustomed beginning. There were some smiles, some puzzled looks (especially from students from cultures not used to having teachers banter), some looking at him with intense anticipation. ‘No, not *that* four-letter word,’ he said in mock disappointment after a short silence, to giggles and titters, ‘you people with wicked minds.’ He had already won us over. ‘Think of wind, rain, surf, sand, love, coup, hurt, pity.’ Suddenly, the mood changed. The man was serious, dead serious. This wouldn’t be a frivolous talk, forgettable, of the sort all too common in classrooms these days. For the next 45 minutes or so, with scarcely a note, he delivered from the podium an oration about the making and unmaking of his country’s history, how the Fijians, Indo-Fijians and Europeans struggled to find their place in the Fijian sun and the different metaphors they invoked in support of their causes. He talked repeatedly about Fiji being a land of missed opportunity, of its desolate political landscape hobbled by an obsession with the politics of race. The similarities between Malaysia and Fiji were alarming, the only difference being that while they are still contesting the basis of legitimacy and representation in Fiji, in Malaysia we have come to an accommodation about those fundamental questions.

The lecture has remained with me. History, for Professor Lal, was not an abstract, remote discipline, but a lived reality. As he said, he lived not above or beyond his history, but within it as an active, engaged observer. I remember asking him: ‘How can you be objective when you are so involved in the history you write?’ And he replied: ‘Objectivity is overrated. As you well know, the Devil doesn’t think God is objective.’ We all laughed, but he had a serious point.

I am passionate about the values of democracy and the rule of law, about the sanctity of the ballot box, and if that is being subjective, then I cannot help it. I am a human being first and foremost, an academic second.

Any country anywhere in the world would be proud to claim Professor Lal as its own, I remember thinking. And it is this man that the Fijian Government had banned from entering the country for life! I wanted to find out more about him and his mission.

I was in the Fijian Parliament on 15 March 2015 when the Lal saga unfolded. It was the last day of my two-month research study visit to Fiji and I decided to visit Fiji's new parliament to catch a session of parliamentary sitting. The new parliament, I was told, had been moved from the Old Battery Hill site in Vieuvo to its pre-1987 location in the old wing of the government building. It was another one of those decisions made by decree, as part of the Fiji First Government's new image policy, its determination to mark a break from the past. The new chamber was impressively refurbished with modern gadgetry. I took my seat to witness what promised to be a fairly ordinary session.

Then, during mid-morning, opposition member Prem Singh asked a question that got my attention: 'What is the duration of prohibition from entering the country imposed on foreign passport holders?' 'It goes from twelve months to an indefinite period,' replied Minister of Immigration Lesi Natuva.³ Whereupon Singh followed up with a supplementary question. 'Why are former Fiji citizens and current Australian passport holders Professor Brij Lal and Dr Padma Lal banned from entering Fiji since November 2009 and January 2010?'

The minister stood up to reply. Fiji, he said, was a sovereign state and it was up to the state whether to allow or disallow a foreigner to enter the country. That was stating the obvious. Then he said, referring to Brij: 'This particular person, he had been very vocal and opposed moves towards democracy after the events of 2006.' He went on:

His actions were viewed by the Government of the day as prejudicial to peace, defence, public safety, public order and security of the Government of day. The decision by the former Minister of Defence, he was given a prohibited immigrant status immediately. We had reviewed the decision when I came into office, and after studying the case, I concurred with the decision made by the former Minister of Defence.⁴

3 Timoci Lesikivatukoula Natuva (born 1957) was elected to parliament in 2014 with 2,691 votes after a 30-year career in the Fijian military. He holds an MA in Strategic Studies from Deakin University and has had several stints on international peacekeeping duties as a senior officer attached to the United Nations.

4 These and the quotes following are from the Fijian Parliament's *Hansard* of 18 March 2015.

The minister referred to was none other than Commodore Frank Bainimarama, Natuva's superior officer in the military.

There was a slight commotion in the chambers as someone from the government side chimed in about the inappropriateness of mentioning names of persons in parliamentary questions. Speaker Jiko Luveni was caught off guard, but agreed with the government.⁵ 'We are referring to particular cases,' an opposition member retorted. 'It is strictly necessary to name these individuals.' Another pointed to the freedom of speech authorised in the constitution, but by now a clearly flustered speaker had had enough. This was a legal matter, she ruled pointedly, and she would allow no further discussion of it. Later the minister told the media that the Lals had been given indefinite bans on returning to Fiji.

I returned to Canberra determined to probe deeper into the matter. Something about the Fijian episode had disturbed me in an unidentifiable way. Banning someone from entering a country was bad enough, but there was hope at the end that the decision might be reversed after a passage of time. But an indefinite ban and that, too, on former citizens, in this case clearly two very distinguished former citizens of Fiji? Padma, Brij's wife, is an environmental and resources economist who has worked in Fiji and the Pacific Islands. She is a recognised authority on the country's ailing sugar industry, I discovered.⁶ And Brij's various accomplishments are reflected in the awards and honours he has received over the years, including an Order of Australia in the Queen's Birthday Honours List 2015 for his contribution to teaching and research in Pacific history. I wonder what all this said about a society proclaiming itself to be a 'democracy' that was so intolerant of free speech and so harsh on dissidents.

I realised on the plane back why the Fijian incident disturbed me. I am a Malaysian citizen of Chinese descent. Our family has lived in Malaysia for several generations. Malaysia is our only home, but we all know in our hearts what our place is in the larger order of things in the country. We have democracy, we have elections, we vote, and we live in hope, but we also know the limit of things. We have what we might call a 'glass house'

5 Jiko Luveni was also President of the Fiji First Party and she was frequently criticised by the opposition for her allegedly partisan rulings.

6 Padma Narsey Lal is author of the standard reference work *Ganna: Portrait of the Fiji Sugar Industry* (Lautoka: Sugar Commission of Fiji, 2009). She was employed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, an international nongovernment organisation in Suva. Before that she had been a sustainable development advisor at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

democracy, as the treatment of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim shows. But for all that, Malaysia is still home. The thought of being separated from it for life is simply unbearable. As we say, the spirits of our ancestors, our guardian angels, roam the land. And, as far as I know, no one has ever been banned for life in Malaysia. That is a record to reckon with.

I knocked on the door of Coombs 4240. As I entered, I found a room exactly as described in one of Brij's essays—clogged with books and papers on the shelves and on the floor, family pictures on the wall, enlarged photos of Fiji, and mementos of various achievements.⁷ It is an historian's office alright, full of memories. Brij looked at me surveying all this in amazement. 'Books keep me alive,' he said, reading my mind, 'connect me to our present and past. Books are the only things that really matter.' This is not a very subtle dig at my generation hooked on Google. I smile and let his comment pass. He is an historian after all, a man of the written word, immersed in the past, a harmless Luddite remnant in his own lifetime (as he said in the course of our conversation).

I turn to his latest entanglement with the Fijian authorities. I began by asking him about Bainimarama. 'Have you ever met him? Why do you think he is so adamant about keeping you out of Fiji?' No, he has never met the 2006 coup leader. As for his reaction:

I wish I knew but I would guess it is not very complicated. No dictator or military leader wants to be contradicted, his narrative challenged, its false foundations exposed. No emperor wants to hear that he has no clothes on. I took the military regime on in my writings, in my speeches and radio interviews, and I exposed their lies and half-truths. I was a thorn in their side, and they had to get rid of me as soon as they could.

This was no self-aggrandising exaggeration. Canadian journalism academic Marc Edge has written somewhere that Brij was the one academic the Fijian regime hated the most, and he was regularly the target of virulent attacks by proregime bloggers.⁸

7 Brij V. Lal, 'Coombs 4240', in his *Intersections: History, Memory, Discipline* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2012), pp. 127–38, doi.org/10.22459/IHMD.11.2012.

8 See Brij V. Lal, 'Caught in the web', in his *Intersections: History, Memory, Discipline*, pp. 279–86.

‘You say “false foundations” but Bainimarama has talked about leading a “glorious revolution”. Surely he could not have succeeded without popular support.’ ‘George Orwell got it right all those years ago,’ Brij responded, ‘One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship.’⁹ He fetches apt quotes with amazing ease, but I am looking for concrete details. Brij replies calmly:

When Bainimarama carried out his coup on 5 December 2006, he really had no clue beyond protecting his personal interests. It truly was about saving Bainimarama’s bacon, not about saving the nation. His contract with the military was up for review and not likely to be renewed, the police were investigating his role in the resignation of President Mara in 2000, questions were being asked about the brutal murder of rebel soldiers in the November 2000 mutiny, and a White Paper had called the Fiji military top heavy. He was angered that various bills proposed by the government might limit his power, grant immunity to those involved in the 2000 coup. And so he struck before he was struck down.¹⁰

‘And he got away with it?’ ‘But all this was carefully camouflaged as Bainimarama took the high moral ground.’ He went on:

No one serving in his administration would stand for elections in future to avoid allegations of conflict of interest. That promise was quietly abandoned. No one in the military would benefit from the coup. The contrary proved to be the case as military officers entered the civil service to staff senior positions or got posted as diplomats. There would be no abuse of the judicial process as allegedly happened under previous governments. One by one, convicted criminals close to the military marched out of jail after a few months on a Compulsory Supervision Order and were restored to their former positions. Judges complained of interference from the Attorney-General. But nothing was investigated, nothing was done. In truth, nothing could be done. All the power was on the other side.

9 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1984) (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1949), p. 332.

10 See Jon Fraenkel, Stewart Firth and Brij V. Lal (eds), *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji: A Coup to End all Coups?* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2009), doi.org/10.22459/MTF.04.2009; and in particular in that volume Brij V. Lal, ‘Anxiety, uncertainty and fear in our land: Fiji’s road to 2006’, pp. 21–42.

Only a few usual suspects spoke up, while others chose the path of quiet acquiescence. ‘Nothing comforts oppressors more than the silence and neutrality of the populace,’ Brij says.

‘How did an illegal coup morph into a nation-building exercise?’ As Brij tells it, the rationale and the rationalisation for the coup came much later.

It was the initiative of some Fijian expatriates who seized the coup as an opportunity to restructure Fijian society, economy and politics, convinced that they, rather than the politicians, had the answer to Fiji’s deep-seated problems. They were convinced that a perfect template would inexorably lead in the course of time to a perfect society. A ‘People’s Charter’ came along with a ‘Roadmap’ to lead Fiji back to parliamentary democracy. Bainimarama, floundering, grabbed the opportunity and consolidated his hold on power. By the time it was realised that he might have other agendas, other fish to fry, it was too late.

Once ensconced, he quickly dispensed with his former hangers-on. Bainimarama had the last laugh.

‘And his hangers-on, as you call them?’ ‘They are now back home in New Zealand and Australia after pocketing handsome sums advising and consulting in Fiji.’ A trace of bitterness crept into his voice as he recalled some ‘supine’ academics—Brij’s words—‘who continued to sing hollow, self-ingratiating praises of the regime from the comforts of their overseas homes in return for small favours or vacuous flattery in their desolate twilight years.’

When I put this to a person who initially supported Bainimarama, he said that Brij, as an historian, should ‘know better than most that human history is complex and there are some imperfect successes and many failures and even reverses’. He said that the coup provided ‘an opportunity for a more desirable direction for Fiji’. At first, Bainimarama was prepared to work within the provisions of the 1997 Constitution, but then changed his mind. ‘We were not naïve or misguided or a complete failure. Some elements [of our platform] have been adopted in the regime’s still illegitimate constitution and policies.’ Clearly, the debate will go on about duplicity and broken promises and motivations and machinations behind the scenes.

‘How did Bainimarama consolidate his hold on power so quickly and completely?’ Brij is pithy. ‘Force, fraud and fear.’ He continued:

In the first few years, the military terrorised people it saw as its opponents: beatings at the barracks, stoning of opponents’ properties (houses and cars), threatening midnight calls. And no one was ever prosecuted. All this is conveniently forgotten now, but victims of thuggery and violence paid a heavy price for standing up for their beliefs. After the setting aside of the 1997 Constitution came a deluge of draconian decrees limiting free speech and freedom of association, the stacking of the judiciary and other branches of government. None of this could be challenged in a court of law. And fear, insidious fear, of punishment and retribution if you were caught criticising the regime.

This, Brij says, is the actual lived reality in a repressive state and the realisation that few will stand by your side. ‘Often, you have to walk alone.’

But if it is a lived reality, it was not immediately apparent on the streets of Suva and the surrounding areas I had visited. People were wary about foreigners, but those who did talk had good things to say. Burglaries were down, I was told, and people in congested urban centres could sleep peacefully at night ‘with their windows and doors open’. Brij said:

Indo-Fijians wanted peace after so many years of turbulence when they were at the receiving end of racist taunts and barbs. They wanted the coups to end, they wanted the country to move on, make a living. And they knew only Bainimarama could deliver.

That rang true to my own experience of travelling around Suva, passed squalid squatter settlements, makeshift roadside stalls selling vegetables, the congested low-cost housing estates. Hope was a scarce commodity in these parts. Bainimarama was their beacon. ‘What happens when he goes?’ ‘The rule of law rather than the rule of one man: that is the only way forward.’

‘Getting the indigenous Fijians on side would have been a mammoth task?’ ‘That it was,’ Brij said.

Bainimarama adopted a two-pronged approach. First, he disabled all rival centres of power. He dispensed with the Great Council of Chiefs, hobbled the Methodist Church, the two pillars of the Fijian establishment. He disabled the Fiji Sugar Cane Growers Council, the power base of Indo-Fijian politicians in the sugar

belt,¹¹ and he curtailed the power of trade unions, all done by decree. Bainimarama had no rivals. Laisenia Qarase [the deposed prime minister] was nowhere to be seen. His former comrades suddenly were all silent. The paramount chiefs were all gone.¹² In a very real sense, Bainimarama was now a paramount chief in his own right, chief of the military whose loyalty to him was unquestioned. The timing for him could not have been better.

‘And the carrot?’

With the help of foreign image makers,¹³ Bainimarama began chanting the mantra of multiracialism, the need to build a race-free Fiji of equal citizens, make Fiji the Singapore of the Pacific, to create a level field for all citizens irrespective of birth. Indo-Fijians were already in his corner, and now many commoner Fijians responded as well, looking at last for their own place in the sun.

I had heard vague talk about this in Suva. The old structures and institutions had ceased to have any relevance to their lives. Open disparagement of the high chiefs was not the kind of reaction I had anticipated.

The surprising thing for me was how quickly the once revered structures collapsed. Brij pointed to the long-term causes of the decline: rural decline, urban drift, a modern education, the spread of the cash economy.¹⁴ ‘The past is another country to the modern generation,’ Brij said. It was the same everywhere in the world, victims of ‘modernisation’ and ‘development’. In the past, the ills of Fijian society were blamed on the Indo-Fijians and their alleged grasping eye on all things Fijian, especially land. But now their numbers were declining; they were no longer a convincing scapegoat.

When the general elections finally took place in September 2014 under a new open proportional representation system, everyone expected Bainimarama to win, but not by such a large margin. But he had all the trump cards in his hands: the public purse to be plundered at will, an extensive propaganda machinery, a leader with an instantly recognisable

11 In particular Indo-Fijian politician Mahendra Chaudhry, leader of the Fiji Labour Party and General Secretary of the National Farmers Union of Fiji.

12 The reference here is to Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, former governor-general and president, and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, independent Fiji’s first prime minister and later president who died in 2004.

13 People in Fiji talked about Qorvis, a Washington DC-based public relations firm that specialises in refurbishing the image of authoritarian regimes around the world.

14 See studies in Michael Taylor (ed.), *Fiji: Future Imperfect?* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

name, periodic statements from the Fiji military that it would prefer Bainimarama to continue in office (and all that it implied), and opposition parties hobbled by various draconian decrees. Old constituency boundaries were abandoned in favour of a single national constituency. And the open list system would allocate seats in parliament in proportion to the votes parties got.

The logic in the system was self-evident.¹⁵ A party should amass as many votes as possible. Fiji First, Bainimarama's party, urged its supporters to cast their votes for one person, Frank Bainimarama. Everyone knew who he was. And that is precisely what happened. Of the 496,364 votes cast, Fiji First got 293,714 or 59 per cent of the votes, and of that Bainimarama got 202,458 votes or more than two-thirds of the votes cast for his party. The next highest vote getter for the party was Aiyaz Saiyed Khaiyum with 13,374 (mostly Muslim) votes, covertly orchestrated through promises and patronage. Clearly Bainimarama had very long coat-tails from which his party benefited enormously. Three Indo-Fijian members got fewer than 1,000 votes and they became ministers in the Bainimarama Government. Six other ministers had come from the Fiji military.

Brij says:

The Bainimarama Government was government of 'small people,' most with no record of public service or standing whatsoever. That was a common view in Fiji. People in Fiji seemed to look back to the old days when they had leaders they looked up to, were proud of. None of the Fiji First's Indo-Fijians, for example, had much standing in the community, getting elected on a handful of votes in the curious electoral system that Fiji has.¹⁶ They know that the sole reason for their presence in parliament is Frank Bainimarama, and they are completely beholden to him, outdoing each other to do his bidding, keeping the commodore pleased at any cost. Bainimarama thrives on public adulation.

15 See Jon Fraenkel, 'Fiji's electoral system changes', *Pacific Islands Report*, January 2013.

16 There are exceptions, I was told in Suva that Mahendra Reddy was chair of the Fiji Commerce Commission and Praveen Bala was the military regime's administrator for Lautoka city. He was Ba town's long-time mayor as member of the National Federation Party.

‘This is not democracy,’ Brij says. ‘Military dictatorship has been replaced by parliamentary dictatorship. Or perhaps, this is democracy Bainimarama-style.’

‘But at least Fiji has a parliament, which is a step in the right direction?’
‘But it is a parliament without teeth,’ Brij replies.

Parliamentary procedures are regularly subverted to get the government’s agenda through. Parliamentary questions are carefully vetted to spare the government close scrutiny or embarrassment, and debate is prematurely guillotined to derive the Opposition of parliamentary time and media coverage. The Opposition is belittled and routinely ridiculed. The number of parliamentary sitting days has been reduced to just four weeks. Just four weeks a year, two or more of which would be taken up during the budget session in November. All the government voted as one in support of the change and the all the opposition members unanimously opposed it.

It is all a brutal numbers game. ‘The government wants to change the flag. The overwhelming majority rejects the proposal to change, but Bainimarama brazenly declares that he has noticed a strong desire for change in the people.’ ‘In that case, why not a referendum?’ ‘No, because that would give a lie to his claim of popular support.’

Following that pattern of unilateral decision-making, Bainimarama announced in July 2015 that he would be prepared to resettle the entire Kiribati population of nearly 100,000 in Fiji if their island was imperilled by climate change. An admirable sentiment, but the people of Fiji were not consulted, there was no debate in parliament, no consideration of complex social and economic issues involved.

Did anyone ask the residents of the squatter settlements what they thought of the Kiribati proposal? This is Bainimarama’s way; he expects complete compliance and capitulation, not questions or criticism. In this military man’s books, disagreement is disloyalty.

‘Everyone says Khaiyum, an Australian-educated lawyer, is the mastermind of these sweeping changes.’¹⁷

His is certainly a name to contend with, the most powerful person in government. He is a highly visible, voluble presence in Fiji, in the newspapers, on television, on radio as the *de facto* leader of the government. Australian author and journalist Kathy Marks has described him as ‘ruthless, authoritarian and vindictive’.¹⁸

He appears as a curious combination of arrogance and affected false modesty, a description with which both his friends and foes agree. Khaiyum inspires fear for his vindictive streak, not respect or regard. Brij has called him ‘unctuous’ and ‘condescending’. There is no love lost between the two.

‘What was the reason for the seemingly unbreakable bond between Bainimarama and Khaiyum?’ Wild, unfounded speculation abounded in Fiji, but Brij has a simpler theory—mutual interest in survival.

One without the other would be like a fish without gills. Whatever else you say about Khaiyum, he delivers. He is no threat to Bainimarama. He does not have an independent power base of his own. He was a nondescript company legal secretary before 2006, and he will return to a nondescript career after Bainimarama. And Khaiyum needs Bainimarama. Without him, he will be politically dead. He knows he is widely distrusted by indigenous Fijians for his controlling ways and confrontational tone. They see him as the evil genius behind the Bainimarama throne. They would not mourn his departure from the political scene; on the contrary, they would rejoice in it.

A harsh assessment, but it has a large grain of truth, judging by my admittedly limited conversation with people in Suva.¹⁹ The truth that power is transitory has not dawned on anyone. Hubris will be the cause of their downfall.

17 Aiyaz Saiyed-Khaiyum has an undergraduate law degree from the University of New South Wales in Sydney and a MA in Law from the University of Hong Kong. Before the coup, he was the company secretary of the Colonial Group of Companies, with some legal experience with the Australian law firm Minter Ellison.

18 ‘Bula Bully’, *Good Weekend*, 21 June 2014, p. 29.

19 Among the names mentioned to me in Suva were those of Dewan Maharaj, owner of Quality Print, who was President of the Sanatan Dharam, and Kamlesh Arya, General Secretary of the Arya Samaj. The leaders of the South Indian community refrained from taking sides.

‘Was 2006 a Muslim coup?’ Many non-Muslims in Fiji had told me in somewhat hushed tones that it was and point out the number of Muslims suddenly in prominent places. ‘No, it wasn’t,’ Brij says firmly.

It was a case of opportunistic individuals who happened to be Muslims who used the coup to advance their own personal agendas or settle old grievances once they knew that Bainimarama would be around for a long time.

And he hastened to add that the leading functionaries of the Hindu groups were also backers of the coup, such as the leaders of Sanatan Dharam and Arya Samaj. They blamed the Muslims to deflect attention from themselves. ‘They are all in the same coup canoe, all equally culpable.’

I return to Brij and his time in Canberra since his enforced departure from Fiji in November 2009 and ask him, ‘Why did you continue to speak out on Fiji on radio, on television and in the newspapers?’ ‘I had no choice,’ he says. ‘The opposition in Fiji had been silenced through draconian decrees and threats of terrible violence. Fiji was thrashing about, blaming everyone else for its problems, especially Australia. They had to be confronted.’ I said, ‘Australia did not instigate the coup in Fiji, the Fijian military did.’ Brij replied:

The blame should be laid squarely at their door. Why does Fiji need such a large standing military?²⁰ And why is the Fijian military still almost wholly indigenous Fijian? When I remind Bainimarama that one of his senior ministers, Inoke Kubuabola, was a key architect of the 1987 coup and an ardent champion of Fijian rights in the 1990s, he gets upset.

He goes on:

Fiji blames the Pacific Islands Forum for its exclusion from it. Well, what would you expect? Fiji violated solemn undertakings it gave to resolve its problems through democratic means and then complains when reminded of the flagrant breach? It cynically uses the Melanesian Spearhead Group, to which it was latecomer, to get sympathy and support for itself in the region. Fiji accuses Australia of being a big brother in the Pacific when it covets that role for itself.²¹

²⁰ According to some accounts, the largest per capita army in the world.

²¹ See Brij V. Lal, ‘Fiji: Fishing in troubled waters’, *Security Challenges* 8(2) (2012): 85–92.

‘How do you see Bainimarama’s intervention in the larger perspective of Fijian history?’ I ask. ‘The military coup of 2006 marked the end of an era in modern Fijian history,’ he says.

All the parameters and paradigms of the twentieth century went out the window with that coup: the obsession with the politics of race and indigenous rights and the fears and phobias they generated, the disappearance of the traditional gatekeepers left on the margins by the forces of modernity engulfing the life of most ordinary Fijians.

Spoken in a true professorial manner, precise and eloquent.

‘So what would be Bainimarama’s legacy, his place in Fijian history?’ There is a pause, and then:

Bainimarama has destroyed one world whose destruction is not universally mourned, in fact, quietly, cautiously welcomed. And he says he has laid the foundations of a new one full of fresh potential and opportunity, but this is easy, self-satisfying talk. Bainimarama constantly recites the mantra of multiracialism, and many believe him. But it is almost certain the military does not, nor many of his close supporters, such as Inoke Kubuabola, a self-admitted architect of the 1987 coup. Beneath the surface of feel-good talk lurks sinister currents of racialism. The two main communities are further apart now than a decade ago, both deeply suspicious about each other’s motives and motivations.

This is a sentiment widely shared in Fiji but rarely expressed publicly. The public narrative will be questioned only at one’s peril. Brij dismisses the talk of Fiji returning to true parliamentary democracy any time soon. It is not representative democracy but the illusion of democracy, repressive democracy, run on the whims of two men. One of them goes and the whole structure would collapse. Brij returns to the metaphor about fish without gills. ‘Fiji is a fragile democracy.’

From politics to the person. ‘There must have been a human, personal cost to his isolation and exile.’ He agrees, but what really gets him angry is the punishment meted out to his wife, Padma. She was expelled from Fiji in January 2010. ‘Padma has never uttered a political comment in the public domain whatever her private feelings and views might be,’ he says.

She broke no law, she has no criminal record. Why punish her for simply being married to me? She is a consummate professional person, totally dedicated to her field of resource and environmental economics. They destroyed her professional career. For the way they treated her, I shall never forgive the Fijian regime. We both will wear the ban as a badge of honour. They are the ones diminished by it.

All of Brij's siblings now live in Australia, and many members of the extended family are scattered around the world. Only his widowed sisters-in-law and some of his nieces and nephews live in Fiji. Technology has lessened the pain of isolation. There is daily cyber traffic in the form of emails, Facebook communication, blog sites. Fijian radio and television news can be freely accessed. Without these, exile would have been unbearable. It would have killed him. What he misses most, Brij says, is not being able to say a final goodbye to dear friends and family. His cousins with whom he grew up in Tabia, his childhood friends, are passing on and he is distressed that he cannot be in Fiji to be with them in their last moments. And there are birthdays and weddings he can't attend, especially as the eldest living member of his extended family. There are so many new members of the family whom he has never seen, and they cannot afford to travel overseas. He hopes that they will understand the reason for his absence, but with so much propaganda around, he can't be sure. And he dearly misses the familiar smell, sights and sounds of rural Fiji, which words and pictures cannot quite capture.²²

Sixty, Brij says, is the age when the past begins to return, when long-gone days begin to acquire a golden glow, and for him his Fijian past has been returning with ever greater poignancy and intensity in the past few years. He has had health issues, I learn indirectly but didn't think it appropriate to raise it with him.²³ Some years ago, he and his wife bought a house in Suva, in the much sought-after Beach Road in Laucala Bay where they hoped to retire to live among friends and family and do volunteer work in the squatter community. His screensaver is a 180-degree crimson-coloured dawn view of the of the Laucala Bay area from his veranda, with Nukulau Island glistening in the distance. The tiny island, I learned, has a huge historic significance, as the landing place of the Indian indentured

22 See Brij V. Lal, 'Fare well, Fiji', in *Mr Tulsi's Store: A Fijian Journey* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2001), pp. 207–08.

23 These include diabetes Type II and glaucoma in both eyes, a degenerative eye condition requiring constant monitoring.

labourers, including Brij's grandfather, and the place where the infamous George Speight was briefly incarcerated. Now it is a picnic spot for Suva's nouveau rich. The scene is the first thing he sees as he opens his computer every day, after all these years, a haunting reminder of fading memories.

All exiles feed on hope, and Brij thought that Fiji would open a new chapter after the elections of September 2014 and allow him back into the country. Encouraged by friends in Fiji and elsewhere, he wrote to the Minister of Immigration, Lesi Natuva, a navy man: 'The values of democracy, the rule of law and the processes and protocols of constitutionalism are sacrosanct to us.' He had opposed the military overthrow of a democratically elected government because, as a former constitutional commissioner, one of the architects of the reports that led to the formulation of the 1997 Constitution, he had no alternative but to take the stance that he did. But, 'Fiji has a new constitution and a newly elected government. My stand was against the 2006 coup, but the coup succeeded and the matter is over now.' After a month, Natuva emailed Brij to say that he was free to travel to Fiji but that he should check with his senior Immigration Department officials.

Brij did. On 15 December, the Assistant Director of Immigration Edward Brown wrote back:

The latest development into your case is that both you and your wife's names are still appearing on our system and we have established that the instructions to put your names on our Controversial List had been given by the Prime Minister's Office. As such we will be delivering a letter to that office tomorrow the 16th of December seeking their comments and endorsement that your names should no longer be on the list and that the both of you can now travel to Fiji.

There was no response from the Prime Minister's Office. Brij was asked to write to the permanent secretary of the department 'advising him of the predicament that you are in and of your intention to return to the country soon'.

There then ensued a long silence. On 10 June 2015, Brij wrote to senior immigration officials asking for a response. 'The government proudly proclaims its commitment to open, transparent and accountable governance but, at least on this instance, its practice breaches its

proclamation,' he wrote in some exasperation. 'My wife and I want to know why we are banned from travelling to the land of our birth.' The reply came on 29 June. It was from Edward Brown.

Through this email, I would like to advise you that you and your wife's cases were processed and submitted to the Honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Immigration for his decision and I regret to advise that after careful consideration, a decision was reached that the status quo should remain. As such you and your wife are still prohibited from returning to Fiji.

What that recommendation was no one will never know. The email came on the date of Brij's and Padma's 40th wedding anniversary. They are the first Fiji-born people ever permanently exiled from the land of their birth.

'It must be a bit lonely at the top,' I joke. 'Give me Fiji any day,' he says. Brij does not glorify exile.

'Exile is a dream of a glorious return,' Salman Rushdie has written somewhere in *The Satanic Verses*. I do not feel that way. I am with Simone Weil who says that to be 'rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul'. To be a real, active member of a living, vibrant community is far more preferable to a life of isolation in another place whose secrets you will never fully know and whose future you will never fully grasp. An exile's life will forever be a life of existential in-betweenity.

Fiji is close to Brij's heart; he cannot let it go, and Fiji's hold on him is deep. Brij points to a huge pile of completed survey forms on the squatter settlement of Wailea, near Vatuwaqa. He had a book in mind on how and why people had uprooted themselves from their former rural homes and settled there. He wanted to explore their dreams and hopes. He talks movingly about a young boy, 10, no more, from the settlement he had met, a student at Vishnu Deo Primary School, who knew—everyone knew—that his mother was a sex worker in Suva. How he coped with the taunts of people as he walked down the foul-smelling lane to his tin shack home, only he knew. He had met a policeman who lived among the squatters to save money to send his three girls to school to secure them good marriages and careers and, if Lady Luck smiled, a foreign passport. There was an old Indo-Fijian man, thin and dark and perennially shirtless, making a quid on the side selling marijuana to high school kids from wealthy homes. There was a painter of sorts, living in a makeshift structure of rotting corrugated iron gathered from the roadside, who dreamed of having an

exhibition of his works in Australia! And he had met a young Indo-Fijian girl, 12 or 13, who had dreams of becoming a nurse who would come back and live and work among the squatters: such a noble ambition in this most improbable of places; so many memorable stories that will now go unrecorded. 'I hope that someone will one day bear testimony to that dreadful human experience.'²⁴

'What now for you?' I ask. He won't be eating 'the bitter bread of banishment,' he says. Canberra is, and has been, a warm, welcoming home. He has many friends who provide protective company and sustain him in his dark moments. He enjoys the respect of his colleagues. He was sent into exile to silence his voice, to send a message of fear to Fijian dissidents everywhere. But they got him completely wrong. He will not bow before the fury of dictators. He says he has the uncomfortable but necessary habit as an historian of remembering what those in power want forgotten. They can deny him his birthright to return to his native homeland, 'but they can't steal my memory'. 'I may not be able to return alive, but my ashes will, to the sacred places of my childhood.' W.H. Auden comes to his mind: 'The lights must never go out, / The music must always play'.²⁵ The memory of banishment will heal in time, he says, but it will not be extinguished, nor allowed to be. 'All that is needed for tyranny to triumph is for men and women of goodwill to do nothing, to look the other way,' he says defiantly. For him, redemption for human beings, as for communities and nations, lies in active remembrance, not in wilful forgetfulness. He says, quoting Auden again: 'All I have is a voice / To undo the folded lie'.²⁶ Over coffee at the God's after our talk in his office, Brij remembered some lines from one of his favourite poets, W.S. Merwin, that reveal the anguish in his heart:

what I live for can I seldom believe in
 who I love I cannot go to
 what I hope is always divided

— W.S. Merwin²⁷

²⁴ Some of the experience of living in squatter settlement is captured in Brij V. Lal's 'A change of seasons', in *Turnings: Fiji Factions* (Lautoka: Fiji Institute of Applied Studies, 2008), pp. 151–72.

²⁵ W.H. Auden, *Another Time* (London: The British Library, 1940).

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ W.S. Merwin, 'Teachers', in *The Carrier of Ladders* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), lines 6–8.

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