

Five

Where Has All The Music Gone?

*On the whole it is better to explore history rather than to repress or deny it*¹

Edward Said

*It is not enough to stand at a tangent of other peoples' conventions; we should be the most unforgiving critics of our own*²

Tony Judt

*[There is a] difference between the silence after the music, and the silence when there is no more music.*³

Vincent O'Sullivan

On 10 October 2010, Fiji will mark the fortieth anniversary of its independence from the United Kingdom after ninety six years of colonial rule. What a tumultuous forty years it has been in the ill-fated history of that otherwise richly endowed country: coups and constitutional crises, state-sponsored constitutional engineering, more coups and endless cul-de-sacs. The prospect of stability, peace and prosperity at the time of independence, the sense that Fiji, as a multi-ethnic society, might have a lesson to teach similarly situated countries in the developing world at the end of colonial rule seems like a bad dream now. What was once thought to be the fate of newly independent countries in Africa and Latin America whose fledgling democratic values were regularly subverted by the military in the name of good governance has now become an integral part of Fiji's postcolonial journey. And there is no end in sight to its unpredictable future.

I was in my final year of high school when Fiji became independent. I remember the occasion vividly. Lollies were distributed at the morning assembly

along with miniature plastic navy blue Fiji flag, the Union Jack came down for the last time as we dutifully recited 'God Save the Queen' for the last time, speeches were made by Mr Sukru Rehman, chairman of the school's Board of Governors, and by the District Commissioner (Mr Dodds?), and words were spoken about achieving independence with tolerance, harmony and justice and about the legacy the British were leaving us: a sense of fair play, the rule of law and the fundamentals of parliamentary democracy. It was a proud moment in our youthful lives and we were told never to forget it. I did not know it then that I would spend a lifetime variously engaged with Fiji's history and politics. I am a part of the history I now seek to understand. I cannot and do not claim detachment and objectivity. But I will say that what I express is not entirely idiosyncratic, that in some ample measure, it reflects the opinion and experience of a section of the community from which I come, and those of the generation of which I am a part. In the sounds of my footsteps many would recognize the echoes of their own.

The late 1960s were one of the most dynamic decades in Fijian history, comparable in some senses to the 1990s, full of animated debate and discussion about what kind of political culture was appropriate for a multi-ethnic society such as Fiji. Opinion was genuinely divided. The National Federation Party, with its base in the Indo-Fijian community, advocated a non-racial common roll of voting with one person, one vote, one value. The Alliance, nominally multiracial but solidly backed by the Fijian and European communities, wanted nothing less than the retention of full communal, that is, race-based rolls. The NFP wanted Fiji to become independent with an elected Fijian head of state, while the Alliance was lukewarm about independence and wanted ties to the British monarchy maintained. Questions were asked about such sensitive subjects as the role and place of traditional social and cultural institutions in the fabric of the wider society, and about the social, cultural and institutional impediments to change and growth in Fijian society.⁴

These were questions which I came upon much later at university. Living in rural Labasa on the island of Vanua Levu, in a village without running water, paved roads or electricity, where the radio was still a novelty in many households and newspapers an expensive luxury which only a few could afford, we lived largely in blissful ignorance. We had few means of finding out what was going on in the world. We had no contact with Fijians who lived on the outer edges of our settlement, no comprehension of their concerns, aspirations and needs just as they were innocent about ours. We were preoccupied with making do with whatever little we had, which was very little indeed. More than national politics, the affairs of the sugar industry, then under the mighty Colonial Sugar

INTERSECTIONS

Refining Company, were of much greater concern to us. The sugar industry sustained us. It was our lifeblood. It was the reason why we were in Fiji. The news of national politics came to us via the occasional Hindi newspapers such as *Jagriti*, *Shanti Dut* and the *Fiji Samachar*. More immediately, it came through occasional visiting politicians, important men, impressively dressed, who talked about independence, about pride and sacrifice, about a new future, things which few of us actually understood. Our cane-growing village was solid Federation country. It was 'our party.' It had fought the CSR on our behalf. It carried our hopes and aspirations. There were a few Alliance supporters in the village, such as my eldest brother, for which I was sometimes taunted at school as a traitor to our community; but since such people were few and far-between, they were generally tolerated as misguided men with misplaced loyalties, harmless.

At high school, politics was taboo, even in the higher grades. The colonial protocol of separating politics from education was strictly observed. It was as if nothing was happening in the country that truly mattered to us. In our high school debates, we chose (or, rather our teachers chosen them for us) topics such as 'Alcoholics should have no place in society' and 'Why students should be allowed to wear thongs to school,' but nothing more serious.⁵ Politics was dangerous, destabilizing territory, best left unexplored. The colonial educational bureaucracy kept a close, watchful eye on what went on in the classroom, and we were all focused on preparing for the final exam which would determine our fate and our school's ranking in the colonial prestige system. In our history classes, we learned about the unification of Germany and Italy, about the causes and consequences of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, but nothing about Fiji itself, or the broader Pacific region for that matter. Colonial rule was no longer fashionable and its defense problematic. The irony is glaringly obvious now. Here we were, people who would inherit the challenges and opportunities of independence, its next generation of leaders, completely unaware of important developments taking place all around us. And as products of largely mono-racial schools, we would be called upon to play national leadership roles on a multiracial stage for which we were spectacularly ill-prepared. No wonder, Fiji foundered on its postcolonial journey.

Fiji embarked on this postcolonial journey as we entered university. The opening of the University of the South Pacific in Suva must count as one of the turning points in modern South Pacific history, availing higher education to masses of students from poor homes who would have, before then, been deprived of the opportunities of tertiary education altogether; higher education in colonial Fiji was the privilege of a selected elite: usually a dozen or so scholars sent to Australia and New Zealand to study 'useful' subjects in preparation for careers in

the teaching profession and in low level administration. The university was for us an enlarging and enriching experience but no more informative about what was going on in political circles in Fiji. Once again, we had our sports, hiking, social and cultural clubs; we staged plays, read poetry, went bushwalking, but serious discussion of politics was absent, or confined to a few individuals. The Indo-Fijians generally assumed that their Fijian counterparts were supporters of the Alliance Party while they, in turn, suspected us of being Federation sympathisers. Given that the political parties were essentially race-based, we were conscious of the ever-present danger that any criticism of a political party could easily be interpreted as a provocative attack on an ethnic group; and so the boundaries remained intact, and we kept our thoughts largely to ourselves.

Other Pacific island students, from Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands and the Solomons, talked proudly of their 'history' as beneficial and nourishing influences in their lives. They had a history to celebrate, which had a coherence borne of ancient heritage or forged in response to colonial rule (the Mau movement in Samoa, Maasina Rule in the Solomon Islands, the monarchy in Tonga). Their obvious pride in their 'national identity' was a source of envy for us. We had no overarching sense a common identity; we were 'Indians' and 'Fijians,' separate in our conceptions of the past and divergent in our understanding of the present. We hardly spoke each others' language. Our memory was racially compartmentalised. While one group lauded the policies of colonial rule, the other rejected it. In our vision of what Fiji as a multi-ethnic society should be like, we were poles apart, symbolised most immediately in the different attachments to communal and common roll system of voting. Our traditions of political discourse were different: one was open and robust, the other hedged in by a careful observance of rituals and protocols of hierarchy. The space of common concerns was small although in the lived experience of daily life, social boundaries were freely breached. For us, history could not serve a serviceable ideology of nation-building as it could and did for many of our Pacific neighbours.

This was the unspoken reality on the ground, but our national myth evoked a different image. The early years of independence were warm and fuzzy. We had become independent without strife. Our links with the British monarchy remained intact. The old colonial pattern of political representation, with paramountcy for Fijians and privilege for Europeans was maintained, with Indo-Fijians having to content themselves with the illusion of parity in the overall scheme of things. We were paraded before the world as a model of multiracial democracy. 'The Way the World Should Be,' Pope John Paul II had intoned on a fleeting visit to the country in 1985. That became our national mantra, shamelessly self promotional. But deep inside us, I am not sure if we really

INTERSECTIONS

believed this myth. Independence had arrived peacefully, but none of the deep underlying problems about power sharing, land leases, the underpinnings of affirmative action, had been resolved. We were reluctant to look too closely into the abyss which faced us in the eye.

In truth, we had merely papered over the cracks and fractures that lay just beneath the surface. There were certain assumptions and understandings which underpinned the independence order which lay unexplored lest we discovered the hollowness that lay beneath the centre of our public life. Race, we were repeatedly told, was a fact of life; in truth, it was on its way to becoming a way of life. Every issue of public policy came to be viewed through the prism of race. You were asked for your race when you opened a bank account, took out a driving licence, left or entered the country. In the award of scholarships, in promotions in the public service, race became a consequential factor in the national equation of affirmative action. 'Blood will flow,' Ratu Mara said, if Fijian sensitivities about land and leadership were ever breached. Race serviced a convenient political ideology but it was also deeply flawed. Neither the Fijians nor the Indo-Fijians were homogenous communities. There were interests and concerns which transgressed communal boundaries in many parts of Fiji. Nonetheless, the overall architecture of national life was race-based.

Expatriate academic analysts scratched the surface and developed the theory of 'Three Fijis.'⁶ There was some truth to this characterization although fundamental structural changes in the economy were surreptitiously unsettling established orthodoxies. The Fijians were behind in some sectors but considerably ahead in others (ownership of land, timber and marine resources, for example). The Fijian government of the day adopted affirmative action policy in favour of indigenous Fijians in the field of education which affected us most directly. An education commission in 1969 had recommended that fifty percent of all government scholarship should be reserved for indigenous Fijians, the unexpended funds designated specifically for Fijian educational projects. Fijian disadvantage in education and in the professions generally, was a direct result of the policies and visions of an earlier generation of Fijian leaders, principally Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, who thought the place for his people was in the subsistence sector in the villages under the guidance of chiefly leadership, and that higher education was to remain the preserve of the chiefly elite. In the abstract, the policy of racial balance made sense, but it was quite another matter at the personal level to see Fijian students getting scholarships on far lower marks to Indo-Fijian students. That policy of discrimination inevitably bred resentment. We felt as if we were the stepchildren of the state. In the civil service, senior Indo-Fijians stared blankly at the glass ceiling.⁷ The feeling of disappointment was muted, but it was real.

A few years after independence, the warm mantra of multiracialism espoused by the leaders, seemed strangely cold.

Things went from bad to worse after the mid-1970s. In 1974, former Alliance assistant minister, Sakeasi Butadroka, founded the Fijian Nationalist Party with its motto, 'Fiji for Fijians.' The following year, he moved a provocative motion in parliament on the fifth anniversary of Fiji's independence, to have the Indians deported from Fiji, with the expense of relocation to be paid by the British government. In hindsight, the motion seems ludicrous, a rhetorical flourish of the Fijian nationalist fringe, nothing more. But at the time, it had a powerful, unsettling effect on us. In 1974, Idi Amin had expelled long-settled Indians from Uganda for no other reason than their industry and hard earned prosperity. If it could happen in Uganda (and expulsion of Indians had taken place in Burma earlier), there was no obvious reason why it could not happen in Fiji. The Alliance government's political point scoring response to the motion, condemning Butadroka but affirming support of the rights of all citizens, not only Indians, who were its specific targets, deepened our sense of alienation, especially when it became clear that the motion's sentiment, in varying degrees, was shared fairly widely in the Fijian community according to Ratu David Toganivalu, himself a man of widespread cross-cultural friendships. For the first time, many Indo-Fijians began to feel that Fiji might not, after all, be their permanent home. The Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau's more liberal, skills-based migration policy opened doors that began to attract many. A gradual drift began.

Two years later, the tremors of the earthquake started by Butadroka was felt when the Alliance lost the general election in April 1977 with 25 per cent of the Fijian votes going to the Nationalists. Five months later, the Alliance recaptured its natural constituency by effectively jettisoning its multiracial philosophy and embracing an openly ethnic one. The Alliance learnt anew the truth of a central assumption that underpinned the independence settlement: that Fijians would remain in power provided they remained united. Henceforth, the main preoccupation of the Alliance would be the preservation of Fijian ethnic solidarity. A similar consolidation was taking place on the Indo-Fijian side. Having won the April elections by the narrowest of margins (two seats), the NFP tried for four days to have a coalition government with the Alliance, an offer which the party flatly refused, the dithering allowing the Governor General, Ratu Sir George Cakobau, to appoint a minority government headed by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. NFP's delay in forming government and its internal but well publicized leadership skirmishes were blamed for the appointment of the minority government but everyone knew privately that an 'Indian' prime minister would not be acceptable to Fijians, proclamations of democratic principles and

INTERSECTIONS

multiracial values notwithstanding. One by one, all the founding Indo-Fijian members of the Alliance party left, or were forced to leave on one pretext or another, finding a welcoming home in the National Federation Party headed by its new leader Jai Ram Reddy. Reddy had not been part of the bitter ideological fights of the pre-independence era. He wanted all Indians united under one umbrella, precisely the goal that Ratu Mara had in mind for the Fijians. Racial polarization was almost complete. We could feel it in our bones.

In 1982, things nearly boiled over. Indo-Fijians had joined hands with some western Fijians leaders disgruntled with the Alliance government's development policies, especially about the lucrative pine industry, and succeeded in nearly toppling the Fijian government. Racism raised its ugly head again. Calls were made to deport Indo-Fijian leaders, refuse renewal of leases to Indo-Fijian tenants unless they agreed to Fijian political control, amend the constitution to enshrine Fijian paramountcy. Crises were manufactured and events staged to arouse peoples' emotions. Old timers will remember the 'Four Corners' program and the Carroll Report.⁸ Once again, the reluctance of the Fijian establishment to concede power or to share it except on its own terms was on full display. The tensions generated by the political debates percolated down to the grassroots, subtly influencing (and infecting) cross-cultural attitudes and perceptions. There was cordiality in public but a great deal of circumspection in private. Not everything, however, was as the Alliance narrative portrayed it to be. Villages and settlements were changing in significant ways as the tentacles of the modern cash economy reached the hitherto isolated sections of the community.⁹ Travel and technology were transforming urban attitudes and relationships. More and more children were attending multiracial schools, and people of all ethnicities were feeling the effects of a stalled economy and lengthened unemployment lines caused, in part, by World Bank inspired policies. A multiracial working class was haphazardly in the making. Old polarities and binary oppositions were making less and less sense.

One result of the dissatisfaction with the existing orthodoxies and power arrangements in the country was the formation of a (nominally) multiracial Fiji Labour Party in 1985. Rhetorically left-leaning, it was in fact cautiously pragmatic, or pragmatically cautious, but its emergence posed a potential threat to the established order of things Fijian where the conventional wisdom held that the business of leadership was the prerogative of chiefs. Its criticism of the eastern chiefs who had dominated Fijian political discourse for much of the twentieth century caused further alarm in minds used to deference and acquiescence to duly constituted authority. It came as little surprise that the Fiji Labour Party-National Federation Party Coalition which won the 1987 general elections was

swiftly deposed by the Fijian military in the name of the 'Fijian race.' I argued at the time that the coup was more than a simple racial contest that it was made out to be by the supporters of the coup and by the international media, that it was more about defeated politicians taking back power by any means possible. This narrative lacked traction in those emotionally charged days when 'race' was the privileged explanatory factor of the coup.¹⁰

The story of the 1987 coups is too well known to be re-told here. The wounds it inflicted on the body politic, social fabric and inter-ethnic relations were profound and enduring. The daily harassment of people, mostly Indo-Fijian supporters of the Coalition, including members of my own extended family, perpetuated religious bigotry and fanaticism that found its culmination in the infamous 'Sunday Ban,' the threatened non-renewal of leases, the rampant discrimination in the public service, left a deep wound on the Indo-Fijian psyche. The sense of rejection and humiliation was deep: just how deep would become clear a few years later. I think I misjudged the depth of the hurt. The 1999 general elections were the first time that Rabuka had to seek Indo-Fijian support to govern. Under the 1990 Constitution, which was completely race-based, he only had to court the Fijian electorate, but there were twenty five 'Open,' that is, non-racial seats under the 1997 Constitution. The Indo-Fijians rejected his overtures for partnership in opening a new chapter in Fiji's political evolution. All his achievements in helping give Fiji the most liberal constitution it ever had, counted for little. To be sure, there were good reasons why the Rabuka government was unpopular: his administration was riddled with corruption and mismanagement and scandals that nearly drove the country to the brink of bankruptcy. Politics of patronage was the order of the day. Beyond all this, though, was a feeling of revenge and retribution. The man had done something terribly wrong and he could not go unpunished. Mahendra Chaudhry, the Labour leader, understood the Indian psychology well and exploited it adeptly for his own purposes even though it was his support that had enabled Sitiveni Rabuka to become prime minister in 1992 in the first place. But sadly it turned out to be a pyrrhic victory for him.

The 1987 coup sent an important message to the Indo-Fijian community. As Rabuka said at the time, they could live in Fiji and make as much money as they wanted, but they should never aspire to political power which should always remain in Fijian hands. The Indo-Fijian community was caught in a cul-de-sac. With very little to fall back on—the land leases were expiring at a rapid rate, there was rampant discrimination in the public sector—many Indo-Fijians began to contemplate migration, which had started in earnest soon after the May military takeover. A trickle turned into a torrent. Precise figures are understandably uncertain but a conservative estimate would put the numbers of those who left

INTERSECTIONS

after the first coup at over one hundred and twenty thousand. The size of the Indo-Fijian population as a result has declined from around forty nine percent in 1987 to around thirty three per cent now. And the decline will continue well into the future through a continuously falling birth rate and unceasing migration

This huge demographic transformation is full of important implications. To start with, the fear of 'Indian domination' which so plagued the dynamics of Fiji politics since the end of the Second World War, when the Indo-Fijians for the first time exceeded the indigenous Fijians, has gone forever. You can feel this in the texture and tenor of ordinary conversation with Fijians who know it in their hearts that Fiji is once again 'their country.' This transformation has demonstrated the potential for the reconfiguration of Fiji politics. It has, for instance, opened up more space for democratic debate among Fijians about such sensitive topics as chiefly titles and inheritance, for example, in ways that would have been unimaginable during the reign of paramount chiefs in the early years of independence. In the 1990s, there was a proliferation of Fijian political parties, each with their own specific agendas that opened up and re-energized the discussion of intra-Fijian issues. The carefully nurtured artefact of 'Fijian unity' was visibly fractured, aided by the departure from the political stage of paramount chiefs who had once wielded overarching, unifying influence over their people, and the disappearance of traditional gatekeepers of knowledge and information by the advent of modern technology: radio, television, the internet, and the visual and print media. This is going to be the future order of the day. 'Race' has lost its edge in ordinary conversation and behaviour.

The bulk of those who left were people of talent and education whose skills were in great demand overseas, especially in Australia and New Zealand: doctors, nurses, accountants, science teachers, mechanics, businessmen. The best and the brightest have left, are leaving, and will leave. On that there is general consensus. Among the migrants are members of my own family: three brothers in Brisbane, a sister in Darwin and nieces and nephews and cousins scattered across the globe. Those who remain in Fiji do so for reasons of business, lifestyle, or enduring commitment, but have their families and their investments safely 'parked' elsewhere: the word is theirs, not mine. Some who are overseas talk of retiring 'back home,' but few so far have taken the opportunity of becoming permanent residents or citizens now on offer. They are keeping their options open: once bitten, twice shy. Among those leaving are people who in the normal course of events might have been expected to take a more moderate, longer term view of the future. Their departure affected the power base of the National Federation Party, playing an important part in its downfall in the 1999 elections. Those who remained behind and who could not leave –unskilled workers, farmers,

the elderly—who had nothing to lose by demanding the sky, fell prey to the demagoguery and vaguely emancipating, empowering rhetoric of the Fiji Labour Party. Among those left in Fiji are the desperately poor with few hopes and little opportunity. They will continue to be vulnerable to the entreaties of opportunistic politicians preying on the needs and aspirations of the truly desperate. And the young will continue to migrate through family sponsorships, arranged marriages or other means. Many are taking courses at tertiary institutions in the hope of improving their chances in the migration stakes.

The creation of the Fijian diaspora in Australia and New Zealand, in particular, is an important recent social phenomenon. We are not talking about ‘migrant communities’ in the old sense of a rupture of a more or less a permanent kind. They might more accurately be described as ‘transmigrant’ communities whose links with their former homelands are never severed but nurtured in a variety of ways of novel ways. People maintain contact with friends and family back home through the internet (emails, Facebook), through regular telephone conversations (via Skype) and through periodic visits. Air travel is not as prohibitively expensive as it once was, and physical proximity helps: Australia and New Zealand are just a few hours away by plane. People help with scholarships, refurbishment of temples and schools, medical supplies and relief efforts during the natural calamities which visit Fiji with mundane regularity every year. Clusters form around places of origin in Fiji (Ba, Labasa) or around religious or cultural affiliation (Sangam, Muslim League, Sanatan Dharam and Arya Samaj) to provide more targeted assistance in times of need. This sort of contribution is difficult to measure but it is real, and it is increasing. The principle of gift-giving is no longer the preserve of ‘traditional’ societies much studied by anthropologists.

Many migrants left Fiji in emotionally difficult circumstances, giving up secure jobs which once held the prospect of promotion and permanency, selling homes and other property for a fraction of their normal price, rupturing relations built over generations, taking a journey into the unknown from which, they know, there will be no return. The pain of dislocation is real if never fully expressed. Understandably, their attitude towards those whose policies led to their displacement in the first place is suffused with a mixture of bitterness and deep anger. Many became strong supporters of the Fiji Labour Party and vocal critics of the more moderate and consensus building strategies of its opponent, the National Federation Party. Jai Ram Reddy’s plea to make a fresh start, to let bygones be bygones, fell on deaf ears. Labour’s red-hot, punitive rhetoric was more to their liking. It came as little surprise that many Indo-Fijian residents in Australia and New Zealand also became vocal supporters of Frank Bainimarama’s

INTERSECTIONS

latest coups for a variety of motives, not the least of which was revenge. Fijians had caused a lot of misery to Indo-Fijians in the past, enthusiastically endorsing the nationalist rhetoric of previous coups. Now it was time for them to 'taste their own medicine,' as the phrase goes in Fiji. There is a reluctance amongst many to believe anything but a positive narrative of the ongoing Fijian saga. That is, whatever the present state of affairs, Bainimarama will come good in the end. He, therefore, needs support, not opposition.

While migration was proceeding apace, there were other developments in the 1980s and 1990s which were aiding the alienation of the Indo-Fijian community in Fiji. Among them were the Rabuka government's avowedly pro-Fijian policies, especially during its first term, when he seemed overtly indifferent to the concerns of the Indo-Fijians. He allocated government funds to enable Fijian landowning units to purchase freehold land on the market but appeared to do little to address the anxieties of Indo-Fijian tenants evicted from expiring leases. Scandals rocked the government. The economic rationalist policies of Finance Minister Jim Ah Koy affected all workers, Fijian and Indo-Fijian alike, especially at the lower levels. Jobs were lost and unemployment lines lengthened. The man who had committed the coup was now embarking on a course that was compounding Indo-Fijian misery.

The expiry of the thirty-year agricultural leases under the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act in the 1990s caused havoc in the Indo-Fijian farming community.¹¹ Leases were not renewed partly because Fijian landowners themselves wanted to enter the industry in which until then they were bystanders. But land was power, too, Fijian power: around eighty three per cent of the land was owned in inalienable right by Fijians. People like Marika Qarikau, the Fijian nationalist manager of the Native Land Trust Board, realised this early and used land as a blunt instrument to extract maximum political concessions from the Indo-Fijians. Tenancies would be renewed, the message went out, if Indo-Fijians accepted the principle of Fijian political control. The threat of non-renewal of leases came at a particularly inopportune time for struggling farmers: the ancient milling structures were collapsing, husbandry practices had deteriorated, tonnage per acre produced was low, and the preferential access to the European Union under the Lome Agreement was about to expire. It was always in the nature of the leases that they would end one day, and the theoretical possibility was held constantly at the back of the mind of the growers. But the reality when it finally eventuated, was different. The experience of uprooting after generations of living in a place and then seeing your formerly productive farm revert to bush, of having to start afresh in a new occupation in a new place, often amongst complete strangers, was wrenching. It left many deeply traumatised and unforgiving of

those whose policies had brought about their demise as cane growers, including members of my own extended family.

Ironically, many positive things were happening in the country concurrently, the most important of them being the review of the racially-lopsided 1990 Constitution in which Rabuka, along with Jai Ram Reddy, played a genuinely important role in establishing. It was a courageous move, going against the grain of nationalist Fijian opinion completely averse to any concession in the direction of political partnership with the Indo-Fijian community. The 1997 Constitution was a genuine improvement over its previous counterparts. There was limited but important movement in the direction of non-racialism. Race had been removed as factor in the allocation of affirmative action programs. The constitution had significant human rights provisions. Most importantly, the power sharing arrangements of the constitution ensured that Indo-Fijians, if they won a sufficient number of seats in the House of Representatives would, as a matter of right, not grace, be entitled to an invitation into cabinet. This is what the community had been struggling towards for nearly a century, and the opportunity was now within its grasp. But in the countryside, emptying from the non-renewal of leases, and in the mushrooming squatter settlements fringing the main urban centres of Fiji, where memories of deprivation and displacement were fresh and deep and the struggle for sustainable living getting more difficult by the day, constitutional reform counted for little. The constitution won't put food on the table, opportunistic politicians told the people, who believed them. Among them was a former university academic.

Mahendra Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party was the clear beneficiary of the gradually growing reservoir of Indo-Fijian hurt and grievance.¹² He won the 1999 general elections by annihilating his old enemy, the National Federation Party, which failed to win a single seat. Apart from anything else, the Indo-Fijian electorate was unforgiving of NFP's embracing of Sitiveni Rabuka. Grudges run deep in the Indo-Fijian psyche. But the Chaudhry government lasted only a year in office when it was toppled from office in a quasi-military coup by insurgents led by the improbably self-styled Fijian nationalist George Speight. It was a dark moment for Fiji, but darker still for the Indo-Fijian community which saw, yet again, a government elected by them overturned by force. It did not matter that the causes of the Speight insurrection were complex and had more to do with intra-Fijian rivalries and struggles for power. The overthrow simply reinforced the feeling of rejection and marginalisation already well entrenched in the broader narrative of the Indo-Fijian experience in the postcolonial period. The fact that Chaudhry's rather abrasive style, developed in the cauldron of Fiji's combative trade union movement, his ill-advised confrontation with the media,

INTERSECTIONS

his untimely and reportedly unilateral pursuit of policies of land reform which could have been postponed to more propitious times, might have contributed to his fate were ignored. The fact that a prime minister of Indo-Fijian descent had been overthrown was enough for many. Chaudhry, it should be emphasised, was not the cause of George Speight's insurrection though he might have contributed to it unwittingly.

What followed made matters even worse, deepening Indo-Fijian disenchantment with the unfolding events. An interim administration set up by the military and led by the merchant banker and former head of the Fiji Development Bank, Laisenia Qarase, which morphed into a new political party, the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) won the general elections in 2001 and remained in power until 2006. The tragedy was that Qarase in his first term had not learned the lessons of Fiji's recent history. Everything he did repudiated the spirit of consensus building of the 1990s. He openly courted Fijian nationalist fringe to remain in power.¹³ He gave the Fiji Labour Party minuscule portfolios of no significance, which Labour rightly refused, seeking Supreme Court ruling on the numerical composition of the multi-party cabinet. The fundamental thrust of his government's policy was to address the concerns and needs of the indigenous Fijian community to the exclusion of virtually everything else. His reading of the Fijian scene was as dated as it was blinkered, premised upon the notion that the Fijians were the disadvantaged community needing special assistance while Indo-Fijians were the well-to-do ones: this when every piece of objective, verifiable evidence showed that poverty and disadvantage paid no respect to ethnic boundaries but freely transgressed them, that, indeed, rural Indo-Fijians comprised some of the most disadvantaged groups in Fiji society (as shown in various studies done by Wadan Narsey).¹⁴ His 'Fijian Blueprint' promised massive assistance for specifically Fijian projects. His education policies directed special assistance to Fijian-run schools when many urban Indian-run schools had more Fijian students than Indian but which missed out because they were not Fijian. The overall narrative of the first Qarase government was Fijian empowerment and Indo-Fijian disempowerment.

After the 2006 elections, looking ahead at his last term in parliament and with an eye on his place in history, Qarase tried to make amends for his errant, explicitly race-based politics of the past. He now honoured the spirit of the power-sharing provisions of the 1997 Constitution by giving Labour nine senior ministries in his cabinet. Labour ministers in cabinet felt there was a genuine effort to make power-sharing work. Qarase himself was, as he told me, full of praise for his Labour colleagues in cabinet. The mood among Indo-Fijians, and in the country at large, was buoyant, filled with optimism that at long last Fiji

might be turning the corner of racially-divisive confrontational politics. But by then, Mahendra Chaudhry, the Labour leader, was completely disaffected. He thought, unlike most other people in Fiji, that the elections had been rigged. There may have been inconsistencies here and there but nothing that would have changed the outcome of the election. As party leader, he wanted to allocate portfolios to his ministers, and he wanted them to be accountable to him rather than to the prime minister as the Westminster convention requires. This was crude politics designed to destabilise the multi-party government. When his ministers balked, punishing them in the name of party solidarity became Chaudhry's prime concern, pursued relentlessly. At that point, the multi-party government was doomed.

Qarase did not help his cause by attempting to fulfil some of his controversial campaign promises which could, and should, have been left for consideration later in the life of his government, if implemented at all. These included returning the ownership of the foreshore to the indigenous owners (the Qoliqoli Bill) which deeply angered developers, hoteliers and non-Fijians generally, investigating the basis of land purchases in the 19th century with a view to returning illegally or fraudulently acquired lands to the traditional owners, and, most controversially, bypassing established judicial procedures to release from jail people convicted of coup-related crimes. The story is more complex than it is possible to discuss here, suffused with a variety of motives. None of the bills actually came before parliament, but the damage to the government's reputation for probity and fairness was significant, providing powerful ammunition to its critics. Among these critics was Commodore Frank Bainimarama, the head of the Fiji military. His wrath focused particularly on the use of the Compulsory Supervision Order to effect early release of prisoners convicted for their role in the mutiny in November 2000 in which several loyal soldiers lost their lives and which nearly claimed the life of Bainimarama himself. He was angry, too, at the prospect of facing a reduction in the size of the top-heavy military force recommended in a White Paper commissioned by the government. There were issues also surrounding the length and duration of Bainimarama's contract. Deep personal animosity between military commander and prime minister did not help. For these and other reasons, Bainimarama's unleashed his coup on 5 December 2006.

Fijian anger at the overthrow of a Fijian government, elected with overwhelming indigenous Fijian support, was understandable. No one had ever contemplated the possibility of a Fijian military confronting a Fijian government, or the unceremonious humbling and humiliation of the central institutions of Fijian society, the Great Council of Chiefs and the Methodist Church. The

INTERSECTIONS

reaction of the Indo-Fijian community was revealing. In 1987 and in 2000, there was immediate outrage: strikes were threatened or mounted, trade unions mobilized, international sanctions sought. But there was none of that in 2006. There were many reasons. To begin with, there was the nature of the coup itself. The 2006 Fiji coup would have to be one of the most advertised coups in the history of the world, announced several years before it actually materialised: a coup by haemorrhage. When the dénouement finally came, it was received not so much with surprise as with relief that the deed was finally done. It was not a coup, Bainimarama said; it was a 'clean up campaign.' The catchphrase caught on; it resonated in the experience of many who had witnessed or been victims of burgeoning bribery and corruption in Fiji. Baksheesh was fast becoming a way of life in the country. Reports of government largesse being channelled to constituents for political, vote-buying purposes were well known. Many genuinely believed that Bainimarama meant business when he promised to halt the looting of the public purse for political purposes.

A new dimension to Indo-Fijian thinking was added in January 2007 when Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhry joined the military administration as its Finance Minister. There are many in Fiji who believe that Chaudhry was in on the game from the very beginning, a charge he denies vehemently, and for which he must be taken at his word. Nonetheless, throughout the steadily building crisis, Chaudhry was quietly seeking audience with Bainimarama after-hours, keeping his powder dry, keeping abreast of the latest developments and taking every opportunity to criticise the Qarase government and his own ministers in it. Perhaps like Bainimarama, Chaudhry too was haunted by a past which had denied him his just dues and why he was determined not to forgive his enemies. Chaudhry was the leader of the Indo-Fijian community and many, for that reason alone, followed his lead. There were other Indo-Fijian leaders, of the National Federation Party, for instance, who opposed the coup, but theirs was a minority voice. Perhaps Chaudhry thought he might be able to use his vast political experience to steer the novices in military regime into a desirable direction, the tail that might wag the dog, but in this view he was seriously mistaken. A year later, he was unceremoniously dumped from the military cabinet, but by then the damage brought about by his involvement had been done. Chaudhry's participation had given the military regime a certain cloak of much-needed legitimacy at a time when it mattered most. Bainimarama had been able to buy off valuable time to consolidate himself in power and fend off criticism at home and from abroad. Chaudhry now finds himself hobbled on the margins, taking occasional pot shots at various government policies from his website. His once strongly organised community is similarly disabled.

The Indo-Fijian business community switched sides in quick time, which comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with its past record. When the coup took place, many were heard to say that the country would bounce back to normalcy within six months. It did not, which forced them to take a longer term view of things, including courting elements of the military. There were some who supported the new regime because of their experience with corruption in the previous administrations, but for many, money making was their main priority, the end which any means could justify. The authoritarian environment suited their purpose. Some are known to have direct access to the members of the shadowy Military Council. The commitment of the business community to Fiji is suspect. It has been so for a while. Many have moved their nesteggs safely elsewhere, to Australia and New Zealand in particular, where many have permanent residence. Businessmen with conscience and commitment have been rare in Fiji.

More surprising has been the reaction of the Indo-Fijian moral community. After the obligatory disapproving tones, many Indo-Fijian religious leaders quickly fell in line. The head of the largest Hindu organisation in Fiji, the Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji, declared quiet support for the stated goals of the coup. The acting president of the Arya Samaj, the wife of a high court judge, joined the military administration's National Council for Building a Better Fiji and urged an understanding of the military regime's plans for Fiji. From western Viti Levu, the perennially changeable politician, Swani Maharaj, a member of several political parties in the past, gave similar assurances of support. The South Indian cultural organisation, Sangam, expressed opposition while the Fiji Muslim League, whose leaders were close to the Qarase administration, maintained strategic silence. But the overall narrative was of compliance.

A part of the reason for the support was pragmatic. There were personal business interests to consider. The regime in power had to be courted to receive special grants and other favours for schools and community projects because it looked likely that the regime would remain in power for longer than originally thought. But an important part of the reason for supporting the regime was grievance and grudge. People remembered the excesses of the Sunday Ban of the late 1980s, the mindless acts of religious vandalism, the burning of mosques and temples and other places of worship, with the support of the leaders of the Methodist Church—Reverend Tomasi Raikivi, Reverend Manasa Lasaro and Reverend Viliame Gonelevu, to mention just three. For this reason, many welcomed Bainimarama's punitive approach to the Methodist Church leaders. It was the same with the humbling and humiliation of the Great Council of Chiefs, which had supported coups in the past and which many thought was

INTERSECTIONS

anachronistic in the modern era. Why should this body alone decide who should be the President and Vice President of Fiji?

In the past, academics and tertiary students played a prominent role in rallying public opinion against the coups. But now, with one or two notable exceptions, they took a back seat. In the early days, many of them were seduced by the 'Clean Up Campaign' message, their strategic silence quietly encouraged by the leadership of these institutions of higher learning fearing reprisals. And anonymous late-night phone calls. Many believed in the possibility of the Bainimarama coup being a good coup, a means to an end, the end being the creation of a better governed, race-neutral society. They were therefore prepared to give the new regime the benefit of the doubt over Laisenia Qarase and Mahendra Chaudhry, two old practitioners of race-based politics. A focus on personalities detracted from the fundamental principles at stake: a military coup had deposed a democratically elected government. Qarase and Chaudhry may fall under the proverbial bus tomorrow, but the sanctity of the ballot box must be guarded at all times. Others offered old, tired extra-constitutional justifications such as the need sometimes to go outside the law to protect it. Students took their cue from their teachers. Their seeming indifference and apathy was dismaying, their involvement in the great moral issues of governance almost non-existent. Perhaps many were simply focused on acquiring the right qualifications to emigrate. Others saw opportunities for themselves and thought it undesirable to 'rock the boat.' Edward Said's words are apposite: 'You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you need the approval of a boss or an authority figure; you want to have a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate; your hope is to be asked back, to consult, to be on a board or prestigious committee, and so remain within the responsible mainstream; someday you hope to get an honorary degree, a big prize, perhaps even an ambassadorship.'¹⁵ Said goes on to say that 'If anything can denature, neutralize, and finally kill a passionate intellectual life it is the internalization of such habits.'

From Fiji's émigré community came unexpected support for the coup, particularly retired Indo-Fijian expatriates. Many had left Fiji, or forced to leave it, in singularly unfortunate circumstances in the late 1980s, some summarily dismissed for suspected harbouring of pro-Coalition sympathies. Now in their retirement, they wanted to return to help set things right, to make Fiji a true, non-racial democracy, albeit on exorbitant consultants' salaries, almost obscene by local standards. Some were clearly opportunistic, yearning for a brief moment in the sun before the inevitable twilight. But there were also among them technocratic ideologues with little confidence in the institutions and practices

of electoral politics to deliver desired outcomes. They had no time for wicked politicians who played the race card to win elections. Voters could not be trusted to know what was in their own best interests. Elections were problematic, low voter turnout endemic in developing countries, corruption and scandals rampant, alienation of people from the processes of governance growing, leading to the conclusion that democracy may not be the most appropriate form of government for all societies. They, therefore, threw their weight behind the so-called 'Peoples Charter,' a document full of motherhood statements lifted straight from Good Governance 101 course, to put the country onto autopilot, leaving elected politicians only to dot the i's and cross the t's. The Charter has now become the military regime's roadmap, its foundational document, but it is observed more in the breach as the regime tramples upon principles of natural justice and basic human rights in order to entrench itself. The Charter supporters are caught in a bind: they can neither condone the excesses of the regime which their participation helped to legitimise, nor can they condemn it outright. Like most Indo-Fijians, they too are caught in a cul-de-sac.

Some responses are easily categorized, but others are not. There are many Indo-Fijians, perhaps the majority, who have no view either way, whose standard of life has not changed much at all since 2006, quite the contrary, who live precariously on the charity and sufferance of others. People who have endured enough upheaval for the last two decades hope that this too will pass soon so that they can get on with the rest of their lives. It is resignation born not of indifference or fatalism, but of experience, an endless cycle of promises made and broken. I should at this point declare my own hand. I have been a strong opponent of military coups in Fiji. I was as opposed to them in 1987 as I was in 2006. For me, there is something deeply immoral (as well as illegal) about overturning the verdict of the ballot box by the bayonet. The history of the world shows that coups don't solve problems, they merely compound them. Violence as an instrument of policy is always counterproductive. And I believe deeply that the intellectual classes (but not only they alone), have the sacred responsibility to speak truth to power. If we don't, who will? I did that in my own small way, speaking and writing against coups and their consequences for Fiji and for which I paid the price. I was interrogated by the military in November 2009 and expelled from the country, the land of my birth. There is no rancour or bitterness: if that is the price that had to be paid for standing up for the values of democracy and the rule of law, than I am glad I paid it.

Four years after the 2006 coup, the Indo-Fijian community, diminished and demoralized, is caught between a rock and a hard place. The rhetoric providing the initial justification for the coup rings hollow now. The 'Clean Up Campaign'

INTERSECTIONS

has yielded few results except more embarrassment for the military regime and its bungling Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (headed by a serving military officer). Like the Qarase administration, the military regime too has used the Compulsory Supervision Order to effect early release from prison of people convicted for various coup-related crimes, including manslaughter of civilians, thus denting its moral claims over the regime it deposed. It is now clear that the military will only countenance a new political order in which it will have a visible and permanent presence. A militarised democracy is in the offing. Burma as a comparison comes to mind. There are many Indo-Fijians who, having supported the coup thus far, feel that there can be no turning back. They have burned their bridges with the Fijian community. They know that they are seen by others, fairly or unfairly, as aiding and abetting the coup through various acts of omission or commission. If the coup fails, they know they are done for, and so out of desperate necessity they back Bainimarama because they know that he is the only one who stands between them and anarchy. Indeed, some are beginning to embrace him as their real leader, not Mahendra Chaudhry or anyone else.

The impulses underlying this kind of thinking are understandable but wrong-headed and in truth counterproductive. Rhetoric of non-racialism aside, the Bainimarama coup is morphing into a 'Fijian' coup as many Fijians take up opportunities left by the departing Indo-Fijians and as province after province lines up to 'apologize' to Bainimarama for opposing his regime. The presence in the interim administration of such notable former coup supporters and members of the hardline Taukei Movement as Inoke Kubuabola and Filipe Bole is reassuring to them. Bainimarama has vowed not to allow 1987 era politicians to stand for elections in the future and yet has rewarded two of them with senior positions in his administrations. There is talk of non-racial equality but not a word has been said about opening up the almost racially exclusive military to non-Fijians. The ethnic imbalance in the public sector is glaring. Military personnel increasingly take up senior civilian positions. Commodore Bainimarama promises to address the perennial land lease problem by making available unused Fijian land on ninety nine year leases for agricultural purposes. It sounds an attractive proposition on paper, but it is like locking the gate after the horse has already bolted. The sugar industry is dying and no amount of artificial resuscitation will revive it. Places in northern Vanua Levu—Wainikoro, Lagalaga, Naqiqi, Coqeloa—are emptying at a depressingly rapid rate as people move into the congested squatter settlements principally in the Suva-Nausori corridor where an estimated one third of the total population now lives, often in wretched conditions. Yet, those displaced from the farming country say they will never return to the perpetual uncertainties of the past. The umbilical cord is

severed for good. Many are contemplating an overseas future for their children.

For the Indo-Fijians, as indeed for Fiji as a whole, the last forty years have been a time of frustration and bewilderment, the promise of independence gone awry. A large part of the problem lay with the architecture of the independence political order itself. It was constructed on the pillars of ethnic compartmentalisation while with time and with the advent of new forces of change, 'race' largely lost its relevance in daily life to all but the leaders who continued to embrace it a 'as a fact of life.' When power was finally wrested from the ruling elite at the ballot box, the military was unleashed to win it back. In a strange twist of irony, the military which was nurtured as the ultimate bastion of power for the Fijian establishment returned in 2006 to destroy its very foundations. It now looks unlikely that it will ever completely disappear from the political scene. Power concedes nothing without a struggle, and once out, soldiers do not voluntarily return to the barracks. The intense and deeply-felt debates over the last forty years about strengthening the institutions of parliamentary democracy –electoral systems, political parties, constitutional protection of rights, institutional mechanisms for strengthening the participation of citizens in the governance of the country –seem in the end to have been a wasted effort. There is poignant irony in the fact that a community committed broadly to non-violent Gandhian approach to politics, and which itself had been a victim of coups in the past, now endorses, however indirectly or tangentially, violence as an instrument of public policy in the desperate hope of a better outcome for itself. But one of the lessons learnt from history is that coups do not solve problems, they only compound them.

The Indo-Fijian community itself has changed almost beyond recognition in the last forty years. The self-contained, self-sustaining rural community built around the sugar industry is uprooted and adrift. The settlements in the cane areas which once hummed with life—local sports competitions, festivals and festivities—now look empty and forlorn. The land has ceased to be the sole source of livelihood for most families, including my own, that it once was. Villages are now essentially residential sites. There is a deep yearning among most young people still stranded in rural areas to leave for some place else. The rapid transformation of the rural scene is eroding a culture and a way of life which once formed the bedrock of Indo-Fijian society and provided a direct link to its foundational past. Cut from its cultural moorings, with declining support and sustenance from its roots, the community is vulnerable, much more at the mercy of forces of change beyond its control. It is, in truth, living on the sufferance of others. In the early 1970s, migration would have appeared a very distant prospect for most Indo-Fijians. It was something that only the wealthy and the well-connected might contemplate. It is a daily occurrence now, uppermost in

INTERSECTIONS

the minds of most people, if not for themselves then certainly for their children. The community is emotionally uprooted. It is often said with some truth that there is hardly a single Indo-Fijian family in Fiji which does not have at least one member abroad. The emotional centre of gravity has shifted. Perhaps in time, 'From Immigration to Emigration' may become the dominant narrative in the overall experience of the Indo-Fijian community, its Fiji sojourn a momentary stopover in the life of a people condemned by fate to wander the world. By then, people of my generation would have moved on. In the words of John Dryden,

*Not Heav'n itself upon the past
Has pow'r
But what has been has been, and I
Have had my hour*