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## Back from the abyss 1992

Fiji's 1992 election was an important and welcome development, marking Fiji's first tentative steps toward restoring parliamentary democracy and international respectability, and replacing rule by decree with rule by constitutional law. The elections were held under a constitution rejected by half the population and severely criticised by the international community for its racially discriminatory, anti-democratic provisions. Indigenous political solidarity, assiduously promoted since the coups, disintegrated in the face of election-related tensions. A chief-sponsored political party won 30 of the 37 Fijian seats in the 70-seat House of Representatives, and was able to form a government only in coalition with other parties. Sitiveni Rabuka, the self-confessed reluctant politician, became prime minister after gaining the support of the Fiji Labour Party—which he had overthrown in 1987—and despite the opposition of his predecessor and paramount chief of Lau, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. In a further irony, a constitutional system intended to entrench the interests of Fijian chiefs placed a commoner at the national helm. On the other side of the political divide, the triumphant 1987 coalition of the National Federation Party and Fiji Labour Party disintegrated in the weeks before the elections, split over the best strategy to restore Fiji to genuine parliamentary democracy.

Fiji had been run by an interim administration since Rabuka relinquished power to his paramount chief and former governor general, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, who in turn invited Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara to

form an interim government that ruled Fiji from December 1987 to May 1992. The Mara administration was confronted by an array of problems, two of which required immediate attention. One was resuscitating an economy shattered by reduced investor confidence, the haemorrhaging of skilled personnel from the public sector, the flight of capital, the interruptions in the sugarcane harvest, and the severe downturn in the tourist industry. The other was the restoration of the country to at least a semblance of civilian rule through the promulgation of a constitution that realised the publicly stated aims of the coups while maintaining the symbolic paraphernalia of parliamentary democracy. To those tasks, Mara and his ministers dedicated most of their efforts.

On the economic front, the interim administration initiated policies that promised to chart a radically different path for Fiji's economic future (Elek and Hill 1991; Stratton and McGregor 1991). Led by Finance Minister Josefata Kamikamica, it attempted to develop commercial links with ASEAN countries, in part to lessen traditional dependence on trade with Australia and New Zealand, whose criticism of the coups had angered the Fijian leaders (Sutherland 1989). This effort bore some fruit as Japanese, Korean, Malaysian and Taiwanese companies invested in tourism, agriculture and other primary production.

The government also began deregulating the economy and eliminating Fiji's import-substitution policies. It started a tax-free zone under which companies exporting 90 per cent or more of their products would be granted tax holidays for up to 13 years and would be exempt from customs duties on imported equipment and production materials. By 1991, more than 300 companies had invested a total of F\$102 million, and another 100 were approved.<sup>1</sup> The tax-free base was extended beyond the garment industry, where it had received its initial and greatest success, to include timber processing for furniture and fittings and manufacturing of light technical equipment (*Pacific Report*, 25 July 1991). Critics complained about the unequal distribution of income generated by the new industries and about sweatshop conditions (Barr 1990), but the scheme had improved Fiji's balance of payments and provided much-needed local employment.

These new economic programs required strict regulation of the labour market and a corresponding reduction in the power of trade unions, which

were prohibited in the tax-free zones. The trade union movement was the backbone of the Fiji Labour Party and a continuing source of irritation to the government (Slatter 1989). In May 1991, the government enacted a series of repressive labour laws intended to control the trade unions, but officially justified in the name of improving the country's international competitiveness and internal economic flexibility. The new decrees enabled the prosecution of trade unions for damages arising from 'unlawful' trade disputes; introduced company-based unions; amended the Trades Disputes Act to include other forms of industrial action such as go-slow, work-to-rule, and the withdrawal of goodwill; provided for the use of postal or workplace ballots for the election of union officials; and abolished minimum-wage councils. In retaliation, the Fiji Trades Union Congress, with 25 trade unions and 45 per cent of Fiji's full-time workers among its members, threatened a massive strike. This was averted when the government retracted the decrees (*Islands Business*, June 1991).

The scene was also set for confrontation in the sugar industry. Dispute there centred on two issues. One was the farmers' demand for a full forecast price of cane of F\$43.70 per tonne, and not the F\$34.96 offered by the Fiji Sugar Corporation—a reduction it justified in the name of falling international prices, bad weather, increased costs of production and harvest delays (*Pacific Report*, 30 May 1991). The other was the farmers' demand for prompt elections, postponed since 1987, for the Sugar Cane Growers' Council. When their demands were refused, the farmers threatened a strike, whereupon the government passed decrees declaring the sugar industry an essential service and proposed 14-year jail sentences and fines up to F\$14,000 for anyone interrupting the running of the industry. Once again the government backed down when faced with further industrial action. Nonetheless, the imminent confrontation between the government and the farmers sowed the seeds of bitterness and distrust that resurfaced later in the political arena.

One beneficiary of the disputes in the sugar industry was the National Farmers' Union, formed in the 1980s—the brainchild of the trade unionist Mahendra Chaudhry, finance minister in the Bavadra government. The Union's success helped to undermine the influence of its much older rivals, the Kisan Sangh and the Federation of Cane Growers. When elections were held for the Sugar Cane Growers' Council early in 1992, the National

Farmers' Union won a majority of the seats. It became, in effect, the Fiji Labour Party's rural arm and the main reason for Labour's electoral victory in the cane belts in the 1992 elections. Chaudhry, too, gained in stature (or notoriety). The National Farmers' Union had enabled him to extend his power base beyond his urban trade union base, and he used his new connections to great political advantage (*Islands Business*, June 1991).

Another unexpected winner from the post-coup industrial tremors was Sitiveni Rabuka, who distanced himself from the interim administration's policies to create a niche for himself as a moderate consensus builder. In the nurses' strike and the long-festering Vatukoula gold mine strike, for example, he sympathised with the strikers. He went further. In June 1991, he said that Mara's administration 'had got their industrial policies wrong, and ought to resign...This government is a reactionary government', said Rabuka, 'made up of overpaid people who sit on their laurels and wait for something to happen before they react'. He even threatened to 'repossess' the power he had vested in the president (*Fiji Times*, 8 June 1991). A few days later he apologised to the government for this blistering criticism, and for 'insulting' his paramount chiefs. Even more incredibly, he joined Mara's cabinet as deputy prime minister. One interpretation of this development was that he had been co-opted, and thus marginalised, by Mara. Nonetheless, Rabuka had signalled his independence. This, together with the government's confrontational industrial policies, was an important reason why, after the 1992 elections, he was able to get Labour's support in his bid to become prime minister.

## **Constitution**

Several attempts soon after the 1987 coups to produce a broadly acceptable constitution had failed. Then, in October 1988, the interim administration appointed the Constitution Inquiry and Advisory Committee to produce a constitution 'having regard in particular to the failure of the 1970 Constitution to provide adequate and full protection of the rights, interests and concerns of the indigenous Fijian people, and having regard to the all the circumstances prevailing in Fiji' (Fiji Constitution Inquiry and Advisory Committee 1998). The loaded terms of reference—how was it determined that the 1970 constitution had

failed and by whom?—needed little comment. The coup leaders were described by the committee as ‘members of the security forces who assisted in the change of government in 1987’. The committee presented its report early in 1990, and a new constitution was promulgated by the president in July of that year.

The new constitution provided for an executive presidency and a bicameral legislature consisting of an appointed Upper House, the Senate, and an elected Lower House, the House of Representatives. The president, always to be a Fijian chief, was to be appointed by the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* or Great Council of Chiefs and responsible to that body alone in the exercise of the powers of office. These were considerable, including appointing the prime minister (again, always to be a Fijian) and members of the president’s advisory council, and presiding over other important functions of the state.

The Senate consisted of 34 appointed members, 24 nominated by the Council of Chiefs and the remaining 10 by the president. The council’s senators retained the power of veto over all legislation that impinged on Fijian interests, including land and traditional customs. Given their strength in the Senate, they could, if they wished, frustrate the legislative efforts of any government, even one dominated by Fijians. In effect, the chiefs and their nominees in the Senate enjoyed untrammelled powers to control the legislative agenda.

The elected House of Representatives consisted of 70 members, of whom 37 were indigenous Fijians, 27 Indo-Fijians, and 10 ‘others’. Here, the new constitution differed from the old one, which had established parity between the two major ethnic groups, then roughly equal in numbers. In another major change, all the members were to be elected on purely racial rolls, with Fijians voting only for Fijians, Indo-Fijians only for Indo-Fijians, and others (Chinese, Europeans and part-Europeans, Pacific Islanders) voting only for their ethnic candidates (the 1970 constitution provided for half the parliamentary seats to be elected from multiracial constituencies). The racially based rolls left little opportunity or incentive for multiracial politics, and they discouraged the adoption of more broadly based political platforms that transcended racial and parochial concerns. There was no practical advantage in a multiracial philosophy, as was painfully evident in the 1992 elections.

Of the 37 Fijian seats, 32 were to be elected from the rural constituencies and the remaining 5 from urban ones. The allocation of seats became an issue. Why, argued many, should the province of Ba, for instance, with more than 55,000 ethnic Fijians, have the same number of seats, three, as Lau, with a population of 14,000? Why should Rewa, with 48,000 Fijians, get two seats while Cakaudrove, with 29,000, got three? Why indeed? And why should urban Fijians, who made up more than one-third of the Fijian population, have only five seats? The main reason for this gross malapportionment was to reduce the voting strength of the urban Fijians whose support, however small, for the Labour Party had contributed to its 1987 victory. It was also part of the larger effort to preserve the Fijian *status quo*.

The constitution thus became a major issue before and during the elections. Most Fijians appeared to support it and to welcome the dominant voice it gave them, although many from western Viti Levu questioned their electoral under-representation and the rejection of their claim for a separate confederacy, the *Yasayasa Vaka Ra*, to complement the existing three (the Tovata, the Burebasaga and the Kubuna) and give them a national voice commensurate with their numbers and contribution to the national economy. In a submission to the Constitution Inquiry and Advisory Committee, a twelve-member delegation of western Fijians criticised the constitution for discriminating ‘against the progressively productive, better educated, forward-thinking Fiji citizens of all races in favour of that minority segment of the community that represents (and seeks to reserve for itself) the aristocratic, undemocratic, privileged pattern of colonial life’ (cited in Sutherland 1992:190). Their protests went unheard, but were voiced again in the elections. The Coalition (of the National Federation Party and the Fiji Labour Party) rejected the constitution too, denouncing it as racist, feudalistic, undemocratic and authoritarian, and promised an international campaign to overturn it. The difference of opinion within the Coalition on how best to achieve this goal led to its collapse.

## **Conflict in the Fijian camp**

With the constitution formally promulgated in July 1990, the Council of Chiefs launched a new political party that it hoped would unite the people under one umbrella, in the manner of the Fijian Administration of

colonial days. Thus united, the chiefs hoped, the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT, or Fijian Political Party) would lead the Fijian people to electoral victory and fulfil the aims of the coup. The reality turned out to be different. Even as the party was being launched, some Fijian leaders questioned the wisdom of the Council of Chiefs, as a formal non-political body, sponsoring a political party. One critic was Apisai Tora, who wanted the chiefs to remain above the fray of ordinary politicking. What would happen to the dignity of the council if it failed to capture all the Fijian seats? ‘Our firm view’, he said, ‘remains that the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* should be at the pinnacle of Fijian society, totally removed from the taint of ordinary politicking’ (*Fiji Times*, 10 October 1991).

Such views went unheeded, paving the way for further problems. The first of these emerged over the election of the president of the Fijian Political Party. Many Fijians wanted a non-political chief, chosen through consensus, to lead the party and provide it with a semblance of impartial traditional authority. Once again, the reality turned out to be different. There were three contenders for the presidency: Ratu William Toganivalu, a high chief of Bau; Lady Lala Mara, the paramount chief of Burebasaga and Ratu Mara’s wife; and Sitiveni Rabuka. To the surprise of many and the consternation of others, Rabuka defeated the chiefs, winning 9 of the 19 ballots of the Management Committee of the Fijian Political Party, while Lala Mara got 6 votes and Toganivalu 4. This stunning result intrigued many Fijians, including the Fijian Nationalist Party leader Sakiasi Butadroka, who remarked: ‘if the SVT delegates can put a commoner before a chief, then I don’t understand why the Great Council of Chiefs is backing the SVT...I don’t know why a chiefs-backed party can do such a thing’, he said, ‘putting a chief—in this case the highest ranking chief, Ro Lady Lala—before a selection panel’ (*Fiji Times*, 4 November 1991).

Rabuka’s ascendancy troubled many Fijians, including some of his former (but now disenchanted) supporters, who had expected him to fade away after the coup. Among the reasons for their disenchantment were his mercurial character and bursts of sharp criticism of Mara’s administration. His aggressive pursuit of political power disturbed them, as Rabuka made no secret of his ambition to become prime minister. He demanded complete loyalty from his colleagues and saw his election to

the presidency of the Fijian Political Party as bringing him a step closer to the top job (*Fiji Times*, 1 November 1991). Other aspirants disagreed, citing the constitutional provision that the appointment of prime minister was the prerogative of the president, to be exercised in independent deliberate judgment.

As he manoeuvred for the prime ministership, Rabuka began to develop ideological justifications for his ambitions. Although still proclaiming himself a loyal commoner, he wondered whether it was appropriate for chiefs to involve themselves in the cut and thrust of electoral politics. Their proper role was at the local village level, because ‘when it comes to politics, the chiefs do not have the mandate of the people’ (*The Age*, 17 August 1991). To underscore his point, he stressed that ‘there are a lot of capable commoners who can play a very, very important role in the Fiji of the next decade’ (*Islands Business*, July 1991). Implicitly, he counted himself among them. He also noted that ‘the dominance of customary chiefs in government is coming to an end’ and soon ‘aristocracy’ would be replaced by ‘meritocracy’ (*Fiji Times*, 29 August 1991). None too subtly, he was invoking the ‘Melanesian’ model of achieved leadership against the ‘Polynesian’ model of ascribed leadership. He compared his paramount chiefs—he had Mara in mind—to the towering banyan tree ‘where you don’t see anything growing’, and suggested that they should step aside (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, August 1991). No one was indispensable, he said, and ‘those defeated in elections should take it in their political stride, accept defeat and move out gracefully’ (*Fiji Times*, 1 November 1991).

Ratu Mara, the intended target of Rabuka’s barb, was among those disturbed by Rabuka’s strident ascendancy. He thought Rabuka an ‘angry young man’, a naive soldier, erratic, ‘speaking off the cuff in any instigation’, and implicitly unworthy to be his successor (*Matangi Tonga*, November 1991). The Fijian Political Party under Rabuka’s leadership was a ‘debacle’, ‘an organisation in disarray’, Mara reportedly told his political intimates (*Washington Pacific Report*, 5 March 1991). Rabuka retaliated, calling Mara a ‘ruthless politician who has been allowed to get away with a lot. Maybe it’s because of the Fijian culture that he is a big chief and because he was groomed well by the colonial government’ (*Daily Post*, 11 December 1991). Early in 1992, Mara encouraged the

formation of an informal 'Diners' Club' in which he shared his experiences with a select number of prominent and aspiring Fijian leaders. Rabuka was not among them. Mara went further and backed Josefata Kamikamica as his preferred successor. The rupture between Mara and Rabuka was complete; yet they were more alike in autocratic temperament and in their fatalistic approach to their public roles than they care to acknowledge.

Tensions within the Fijian Political Party erupted openly when candidates were selected for the 1992 elections. In province after province aspiring candidates questioned the selection procedures, threatened to stand as independents, and sometimes formed their own parties even as they pledged their loyalty to the chiefs. In Macuata, the situation had so deteriorated that it required Rabuka's personal intervention. Here, first ballot choices had to be discarded to accommodate rebellious would-be independents. One of the stranger ironies of the selection process was that some of the most ardent supporters of the coup missed out altogether. Many of them became bitter critics of Rabuka. Rabuka also had to contend with new Fijian political parties that challenged the authority and legitimacy of the Fijian Political Party. There was Sakiasi Butadroka's Fijian Nationalist Party, revamped and renamed the Fijian Christian Nationalist Party in 1991. Characteristically anti-Indian, Butadroka called for more balanced development in the Fiji provinces; decentralisation of the Ministry of Fijian Affairs; reversion of all fee-simple and Crown lands to their native owners; complete Fijian ownership of all rents from the exploitation of mineral and natural resources; reactivation of traditional, rural administrative structures; support for a fourth confederacy and the rotation of the presidency among all of them; and an all-Fijian parliament within 10 years, in recognition of the Fijian people's 'full authority and absolute power'.<sup>2</sup> In April 1992, Butadroka joined forces with Ratu Osea Gavidi's newly formed, Nadroga-based, Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua (STV, Party of the People of the Land), which was essentially a revival of the long-dormant Western United Front.

This coalition's rival for support among Fijians outside the Fijian Political Party generally (and in western Viti Levu in particular), was Apisai Tora's All Nationals Congress, launched on 22 June 1991. Tora, the cigar-chomping, self-styled Fidel Castro of the Pacific, militant trade

unionist of the 1960s turned ethnic chauvinist of the 1980s, was the quintessential survivor of Fiji politics. Once a member of the Indian-based National Federation Party, he joined the Alliance Party in the late 1970s and was rewarded with a cabinet portfolio. After the Labour Coalition's victory in 1987, he helped found the Taukei Movement, and was a member of the various post-coup cabinets until forced out by Mara when he, Tora, founded the All Nationals Congress.

This party presented itself as a moderate, multiracial successor to the defunct Alliance Party, which had ruled Fiji for nearly two decades. It committed itself to rethinking the interim administration's social, economic and industrial policies, promoting regional development to favour economically depressed provinces, reviewing such statutory organisations as the Native Land Trust Board and, most importantly, the constitution. The anti-eastern Fijian sentiment was there, too, as Tora made 'no secret of his desire to end the political dominance of eastern Fijians, as represented by Ratu Mara and Ganilau' (*Islands Business*, October 1991). Tora remained a steadfast advocate of the fourth confederacy, and presented himself as a progressive—an agent of change (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, July 1991). Tora, Butadroka and leaders of a few ephemeral parties that disappeared just as soon as they were launched came from different ideological backgrounds and had diverse political agendas. What they all shared was an unmistakable hostility toward the hegemony of eastern Fijians and toward the Fijian Political Party, which they saw as Mara's instrument.

On the eve of the election the Fijians seemed less united than ever before. Rabuka's leadership of the Fijian Political Party and his prime ministerial aspirations were contested. Triumphant post-coup Fijian nationalism was in danger of derailment. The removal of the perceived threat of Indian dominance that had distorted political discourse in Fiji for so long had allowed further discussion of internal Fijian issues that had long remained hidden from the non-Fijian public. As one *Fiji Times* editorial put it, 'the Fijians are now facing so many issues that challenge the very fabric of traditional and customary life. Things they thought were sacred have become political topics, publicly debated, scrutinised and ridiculed'. 'Now', the editorial continued, 'the threat is coming from within their own communities where the politics of numbers are changing

loyalties and alliances. For the first time in modern history, the Fijian community is in danger of fragmentation; democracy is taking its toll. The chiefs are losing their mana and politicians enjoy increasing influence' (*Fiji Times*, 21 March 1991).

### Coalition in disarray

Fortunately for Rabuka and others in the Fijian camp, things were little better on the Coalition side, where internal divisions and differences over strategy proved even more irreconcilable and destructive. The coalition between the National Federation Party and the Fiji Labour Party had fallen on hard times. It had become a moribund marriage of convenience marooned in the shallows. Its unity, evident following the coups, had been subsumed by personal leadership ambitions, following the death of Timoci Bavadra in 1989, and shattered by deep differences over strategy. The Coalition had denounced the new constitution vehemently, but the partners disagreed over how best to work for its repeal. Should they participate in the elections and initiate a dialogue with the new government in parliament, or should they boycott the elections and rely on international pressure to effect the necessary changes?

The National Federation Party, led by its former parliamentary leader Jai Ram Reddy, decided in late July 1991 against the boycott option, choosing to participate in the elections under protest. Several considerations informed this decision. The party leaders realised that international pressure, by which the Fiji Labour Party placed much store, would be to no avail, and that in the end the Indo-Fijian leaders would have to deal with the elected representatives of the Fijian people. Only if the Fijian leaders rejected dialogue and refused to consider issues of concern to them would the National Federation Party use the boycott weapon. Participation in the election did not mean acceptance of the constitution. 'If you get elected and do nothing, then you are accepting it', said Reddy. 'If at every single opportunity, you raise your voice, and if need be, walk out of the House: that is not accepting the constitution' (*Fiji Times*, 28 August 1991).

The NFP leaders also realised that a boycott would be doomed to fail as many Indo-Fijians would stand for election anyway, and present themselves as leaders of their people. Indeed, small anti-Coalition, pro-

election Indo-Fijian political parties had already begun to emerge, among them the Fiji Indian Congress and the Fiji Indian Liberal Party. Participation under protest was consistent with the National Federation Party's past history. In 1965, for instance, it had been unhappy with the outcome of the London constitutional conference, which favoured Europeans and Fijians, but had worked under the new constitution for two years before staging a boycott in 1967 and precipitating a by-election a year later. The NFP leaders also heeded the advice of leaders overseas that the boycott option should be the last resort (*Daily Post*, 19 May 1992). As for the FLP leaders, Reddy said: 'they are by nature negative and their language is boycott, strike, disrupt, destroy and wreck. They want to destroy everything in sight' (*Daily Post*, 11 May 1992).

The Fiji Labour Party disagreed. How could it participate in an election under a constitution it had roundly condemned as racist, authoritarian, undemocratic and feudalistic? To do so would accord legitimacy to that flawed document and undermine the party's credibility internationally. The Fiji Labour Party told visiting Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans in February 1992: 'we do not wish to be a party to an election that will not return Fiji to genuine democracy but instead entrench an authoritarian racist government similar to that of South Africa' (Fiji Labour Party Press Release, 4 February 1992). International pressure, the party believed, would force the government into a dialogue on the constitution. Said Navin Maharaj, its secretary general, 'nothing can be done by going into parliament and success can only come through international pressure, and that is what we intend to do' (*Daily Post*, 27 April 1992). 'Rabuka has explicitly told us that the Constitution cannot be changed and likewise the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei has not given any assurance of any change', said Mahendra Chaudhry. 'Do you think the coup-plotters carried out so much atrocities for the last five years just to change the constitution?' (*Daily Post*, 11 May 1992).

That was the Fiji Labour Party's public stance. In private, however, it was characteristically pursuing other options. While it would formally maintain its boycott stance, the party encouraged its indigenous Fijian members to forge a broad coalition with parties outside the Fijian Political Party, including the Fijian Nationalist Party and the All Nationals Congress, and even to contest election as independents. Such a move

was, in fact, made in October 1991, and a 38-point joint platform was prepared. Among other items, it included the promotion of indigenous Fijian aspirations in accordance with international conventions; the creation of a fourth Fijian confederacy; the introduction of a national leadership code of conduct; the preservation 'of the dignity and integrity and independence of the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* so that it is not manipulated to support the type of politics that diminishes people's respect for the chiefs'; condemnation of the anti-urban bias of the constitution; and an urgent review of the constitution to make it 'consistent with democratic principles, United Nations human rights conventions and Commonwealth statements of principles and thus enable Fiji to apply for membership of the commonwealth as soon as possible'.<sup>3</sup>

At first the prospects looked promising, but they fell apart when Butadroka had second thoughts about what the proposals would do to his own credibility. 'If there is any work done with the FLP, our image as a deeply-rooted Fijian party will be tarnished', he said. 'Either you come in as independent candidates on our party ticket or we stand as adversaries in the election'. Koresi Matatolu, the All Nationals Congress general secretary, laid down other preconditions. His party would join, he said, if Butadroka retracted his call to deport Indians from Fiji and if the Fiji Labour Party recognised the constitution. Talk of solidarity remained just talk.

The FLP leaders had also been seeking to merge the Fiji Labour Party and the National Federation Party into a single party (*Fiji Times*, 18 August 1991). Labour reminded the National Federation Party of its apparent commitment to a merger in the late 1980s, which the party disavowed. It rejected the merger option, too, in the interest of political survival. The coalition arrangement had worked well, said Reddy, and should continue. 'We can speak out without treading on each other's toes. In a merged party, I would be very unhappy if the party agreed to nationalisation. Then, we would project an image of division'. He went further: 'I am more and more intrigued, as time progresses, about the real motive behind this move. Is it unity or is it because the NFP has become too much of a nuisance for the Labour Party?' (*Fiji Times*, 21 August 1991).

Reddy and other NFP leaders were not the only ones opposed to the merger. Vocal opposition came also from some leading Fijian members

of the Fiji Labour Party, among them Simione Durutalo, its founding vice president. He called the merger proposal a strategic mistake that would 'lock everybody back into pre-1987 voting patterns with people voting on racial lines rather than for parties', by once again raising the spectre of Indo-Fijian domination (*Fiji Times*, 16 August 1991). He went on that it would be far better for the Fiji Labour Party to prepare its groundwork and position itself for victory in the 1996 elections than attempt to win through a merger in 1992: 'then, if the military comes in, we will have the people's support'. The only way forward in Fiji politics, he said, was to 'democratise Fijian society'. 'The Fiji Labour Party is the only political party able to create an interethnic alliance that can simultaneously champion the Indo-Fijian interests for long-term political security as well as indigenous Fijian commoners' interests and aspirations for long-term economic security' (*Fiji Times*, 16 August 1991). Durutalo and others became disenchanted with the Fiji Labour Party when its leaders ignored their advice and refused to reconsider the party's boycott strategy. On the eve of the elections, some of them left the party or began to forge links with other Fijian parties.

In a last, almost desperate, attempt to maintain a facade of unity and to prevent a splitting of the Indo-Fijian community, the Fiji Labour Party offered not to disrupt the National Federation Party's election plans if it obtained the government's assurance that it would immediately address all issues of concern to the Coalition (foremost among them a review of the constitution). Without such assurance, the National Federation Party would boycott parliament. But if the government agreed to its demands, it would enter parliament and participate in deliberations 'only to the extent of giving effect to redressing those grievances'. Furthermore, the National Federation Party would 'consult with and obtain the agreement of FLP at all stages of the negotiation' (Fiji Labour Party Press Release, 30 April 1992).

It was a fantastic demand, which the National Federation Party could not accept 'without sacrificing for all time NFP's reputation and integrity'. One NFP leader likened the ultimatum to the extortionate demands of a tyrannical landlord. Perhaps the Fiji Labour Party did not really expect the National Federation Party to accept its conditions. Perhaps it wanted to use rejection as an excuse to participate in the elections, for by early

1992 the boycott option had become untenable and was being severely criticised throughout Fiji. Even its respected international advisers were of that mind. Among them was Professor Yash Ghai, who wrote

... [i]t is possible to attack a Constitution and yet take part in the elections. But it is absolutely essential that the terms on which it [the party] takes part is made clear so that it [taking part] is not interpreted as an endorsement of the constitution. A party may wish to take part in the elections with a view to changing the constitution, or making the political system under it difficult to operate, or not letting its rivals dominate parliament and government. So while there may be a strong moral case for a boycott, it may occasionally make sense to take part in elections while simultaneously attacking the constitution. The really important question was not to boycott, but whether to endorse the constitution (*Fiji Times*, 7 May 1992).

Unable to coerce the National Federation Party into acquiescence, with its own house in disarray, public opinion heavily in favour of participating in the elections, and facing marginalisation because of the NFP's election decision, the Fiji Labour Party acknowledged the inevitable and late in April announced its decision to participate. By any measure, this was a stunning *volte face*. How did the Fiji Labour Party explain its new position? Said Navin Maharaj: 'it was only a change in strategy: from boycott of the election to boycott of parliament'. Why? 'The change came about because the NFP has no clear picture' (*Daily Post*, 11 May 1992). Its flip-flop left its supporters dismayed and uncertain. Amid acrimony and vacillation, the Coalition had collapsed.

The one major political party that was not as consumed by bitter internal divisions was the General Voters Party (GVP). It was in some ways a resurrection of the pre-coup General Electors' Association, which was a small but influential spoke in the Alliance Party wheel. The only difference now was that the general electorate had been widened to include not only part-Europeans, Chinese and people of mixed ancestry, but also other Fiji citizens of Pacific islands ancestry who, before the coup, were registered on the Fijian roll. Like the other ethnically based parties, the General Voters Party's concerns were parochial, focusing on the interests and aspirations of its own community. It proclaimed itself in favour of 'a system of democracy which incorporates the principle of guaranteed representation of major ethnic groups' in parliament, and opposed to 'any attempt to weaken or remove a legally established right to the existing ownership of land, whether native or freehold' (General

Voters Party manifesto). Large portions of freehold land in Fiji were owned by Europeans, and the five General Voters Party seats in parliament were grossly out of proportion to their numbers.

## The campaign

The campaign itself was much more subdued than in previous years. The interim administration's decree making libel a criminal offence punishable by up to two years imprisonment and a F\$1,300 fine, together with the memory of the harassment of journalists since the coups, deterred the media from heavily scrutinising the election platforms and personalities. The racially segregated electoral system encouraged candidates to confine themselves to issues of particular concern to their ethnic communities, or, in the case of the Fijians, their provinces and regions. National, non-racial issues were present in the election platforms and in the campaign rhetoric, but were not given serious consideration.

Reddy, for example, talked of a government of national unity 'based on a formula of power-sharing which would ensure that every community is represented at the decision-making level' (*Daily Post*, 9 May 1992), but his proposal was ridiculed by the Labour Party, which said that such an arrangement would 'both implicitly and explicitly give credence and legitimacy to the decreed constitution', and reduce the National Federation Party to a 'subservient position...depending on the mercy of the Fijian side in parliament' (Fiji Labour Party Press Release, 11 May 1992). Ratu Mara and Ratu William Toganivalu attempted to distance themselves from the constitution they had generated, much to the annoyance of Rabuka and his allies. But for the most part such issues remained in the background. Instead, internal fighting in both camps dominated the news.

In the Fijian Political Party, the main question centred on who would be prime minister, Sitiveni Rabuka or Josevata Kamikamica. Sometimes the campaigns on behalf of the two men became unpleasant, even vicious. As was his wont, Rabuka changed his tune often, depending on his audience. To the fundamentalist members of the Methodist Church, he renewed his call to declare Fiji a Christian state and reimpose the Sabbath decree; from his militant nationalist supporters, he demanded complete loyalty and promised action, if needed, 'in order to complete what they

started'; to the media and to his opponents, he was the very essence of good sense and moderation, talking of national reconciliation and dialogue ('what happened to the Pacific way?' he asked—without irony, so far as one could tell (*The Review*, May 1992)). For his part, Kamikamica, who was outwardly confident of his chances, highlighted his administrative experience, distanced himself from the extreme rhetoric of his more nationalist-minded compatriots, and promised to work toward genuine multiracialism.

In the former Coalition camp, the exchanges were equally pointed and unpleasant. Leaders exhumed each others' records of public service since the coups, ridiculed their personal commitments to Fiji—many of them had visas for permanent residence overseas—and traded insults, accusing each other of opportunism, arrogance and treachery. The vehemence of the attacks was especially surprising in view of the virtually identical platforms of the two political parties. The republic's first election campaign produced more heat than light, as the confused electorate pondered their limited choices.

Polling lasted a week. In the Fijian constituencies, the SVT won 30 of the 37 Fijian seats, the Fijian Nationalist Party 3, the Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua 2, and independents 2. The Fijian voter turnout averaged 78 per cent. A further breakdown of these figures reveals noteworthy trends. The SVT achieved its greatest triumph in the small eastern constituencies of the Koro Sea, getting 89.1 per cent of all votes cast (27,658). Accounting for its spectacular success was a well-organised campaign, and the undivided support of the provincial councils. In the urban constituencies, too, the party did relatively well, capturing 74.7 per cent of all the votes. Again a more effective campaign organisation and an attractive slate of candidates helped this party.

In the rural constituencies generally, however, the SVT did less well, winning only 63.3 per cent of all the rural votes (80,195). In rural Viti Levu, it won only 49.7 per cent of the total Fijian votes (52,538); the main reason for its modest showing there being the challenge of the other Fijian parties, especially the Fijian Nationalist Party and the Sogosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua, which together won 26.5 per cent of all the Fijian votes. Butadroka, the Fijian Nationalist Party leader, was a well-known personality and a charismatic campaigner. His grassroots

style of campaigning, and his uncomplicated political message laced with earthy humour, won him support, as it had done in previous elections. His running mate, Ratu Mosese Tuisawau, was a high chief of the Rewa province, appealed powerfully to the Rewans' sense of pride by demanding a greater Rewan voice in national Fijian affairs. One of the Fijian Nationalist Party's proposals was the rotation of the presidency among the four confederacies, with Rewa next in line. Ratu Osea Gavidivi and his running mate, Mosese Tuisawau, campaigning under the banner of the Fijian Nationalist Party and the Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua, won the 2 Nadroga/Navosa seats, again by focusing on local issues.

The other major party that had threatened to erode support for the Fijian Political Party in Viti Levu was the All Nationals Congress. It did not win any seats, but only narrowly missed out in Ba where it managed to capture 5,775 votes; it gained 8,384 votes in rural Viti Levu as a whole (10.5 per cent of the Fijian votes cast). Why did the All Nationals Congress fail? Tora's own chequered political career was a factor, as was the fear among many Fijians that anything short of a clear victory for the Fijian Political Party could see Fiji facing more political upheaval (as Rabuka seemed to hint in his speeches).

Labour's dismal performance in the Fijian constituencies was not surprising. It was underfunded, underprepared and was late to enter the fray. Labour put up disenchanting candidates, who were merely expected to keep the party flag flying, in only a handful of constituencies. Disunity among its leaders did not help matters, nor did public criticism of the party's election strategy by some of its leading Fijian members, such as Simone Durutalo. Many Fijians who had joined the party in 1987 had left, including such luminaries as Joeli Kalou and Jo Nacola, both ministers in the Bavadra government—the former contesting the election on the SVT ticket and the latter as an independent. On the eve of the election, Labour had come to be regarded among many Fijians as an Indo-Fijian party.

Among the Indo-Fijians, where the voter turnout was 76.7 per cent, the results confounded all predictions. The National Federation Party, which had been widely expected to win nearly all the 27 Indo-Fijian seats, won only 14, the remaining 13 going to the Fiji Labour Party. Minor Indo-Fijian parties failed to make any mark. The National Federation Party won 50 per cent of the total Indo-Fijian votes cast

(114,005) and the Fiji Labour Party 47.6 per cent. A breakdown of the figures shows important trends. Labour won most of the seats in the cane belts of Fiji, whereas the National Federation Party, founded as a cane farmers' party in the early 1960s, achieved its greatest success in the urban areas, which should have been Labour's domain.

Labour's victory in the cane belt benefited from the success in the Sugar Cane Growers' Council of the National Farmers' Union, whose real leader, Mahendra Chaudhry, also led the Fiji Labour Party. In the countryside, Labour and the Farmers' Union were seen as one and the same. The National Federation Party had let the Fiji Labour Party claim public credit for the Coalition's role in resolving the dispute in the sugar industry, which Labour was now portraying as its own, rather than a joint, achievement. The National Federation Party was not helped by being portrayed as a party of the Indo-Fijian bourgeoisie. In urban areas, it was better funded, fielded better candidates and was able to benefit from bitter divisions within the ranks of the trade unions. Some of Chaudhry's harshest critics, such as trade union leader James Raman, were NFP candidates. Labour's victory was as unexpected as it was sweet. Its sharper message, better organisation, and strong support among Indo-Fijian voters for whom the National Federation Party's earlier anti-colonial struggles were a vague memory, had worked to Labour's advantage, ensuring its important role in the Indo-Fijian community for some time to come. The National Federation Party, on the other hand, is, and sees itself as, essentially a communal party, but the interests of Indo-Fijians are not as homogeneous as they once appeared to be. Its message was blurred, and its viability as a credible force is unclear.

## **The race for prime minister**

The race for prime minister started even before results were known, as leading candidates Rabuka and Kamikamica began to campaign for support among the opposition parties. The exact details and sequence of events in the hectic few days following the elections will probably never be fully revealed, but the basic outline is clear. As soon as the final results were announced, the parliamentary board of the Fijian Political Party met, on 31 May, to elect its leader, who would be its candidate for

prime minister. At this meeting, Rabuka repeatedly won 18 votes, Kamikamica 2, Filipe Bole 4, and Ratu William Toganivalu 3. With his party's mandate, and with the Fijian Political Party lacking an outright majority to form a government, Rabuka began to explore a coalition with the General Voters Party (which had won all the five general seats), the Fijian Nationalist Party, the Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua, and the two independents. Again the details are unclear, though we do know from press statements that the General Voters Party opposed any coalition that included the Fijian Nationalist Party, whose extremist platforms it had denounced during the campaign. The General Voters Party preferred Kamikamica for the top job.

When Rabuka went to Government House on 1 June to be sworn in, claiming the support of 42 members of the House, President Ganilau told him to produce the signatures of all those who supported him before 10am the next day. The president, thought to be leaning in Kamikamica's direction, was aware of the split in the Fijian Political Party over the leadership and was mindful of Mara's preference. Equally, he was mindful of the constitutional requirement to appoint as prime minister the Fijian best able to command the majority support of all members in the House of Representatives, including the twenty-seven Indo-Fijian members.

Obtaining the signatures was not as easy as Rabuka might have supposed; by the time he returned from Government House, new tensions had arisen. Some Fijian members who had supported him initially opposed any formal association with the Fijian Nationalist Party and threatened to support his opponent. The situation was also complicated by the National Federation Party's public support for Kamikamica. Reddy had told Rabuka's emissaries that he could not support the major general, whom he did not and could not trust. He considered Kamikamica a safer bet as he had verbally assured the National Federation Party of his willingness to initiate immediate debate on the constitution. By late the same evening, Rabuka's fortunes were uncertain; by then, according to some sources, Kamikamica had secured the support of 30 parliamentarians (10 Fijian Political Party members, 1 Rotuman, 5 of the General Voters Party, and 14 from the National Federation Party), while Rabuka was supported by 29 from the Fijian Political Party, 5 Nationalists, and 2 Independent. Faced with this crisis, Rabuka's emissaries contacted the Fiji Labour Party in the early

hours of 2 June. Soon afterward that party wrote to Rabuka. Their historic letter is reproduced here.

2 June 1992 (CONFIDENTIAL)

Major General Sitiveni Rabuka (Hand Delivered)

Dear Major General Sitiveni Rabuka

The Fiji Labour Party has agreed to lend support to you for the position of Prime Minister on the basis that our party would be given firm assurance on the following issues in writing:

A. CONSTITUTION

The new government would immediately initiate a process of review and change of the 1990 Constitution by a jointly appointed team that would take into regard the objections that have been expressed by the Fiji Labour Party on behalf of the Indian community, urban Fijians and Western Fijians, and take immediate measures to address such objections.

Such a process to be initiated as soon as parliament convenes.

B. LABOUR REFORM DECREES

That the new government would urgently seek to have the labour decrees revoked to take account of the objections by the trade union movement in Fiji.

C: VAT (value-added tax)

That the new government would urgently scrap VAT as a matter of priority.

D: LAND

That the new government would convene a machinery to facilitate discussions on the issue of land, particularly relating to the extension of ALTA [Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act]

That as soon as the parliament convenes, such a machinery be deliberated upon. The Fiji Labour Party is awaiting your urgent and serious consideration of our request.

Yours Sincerely Jokapeci Koroi (Mrs) (President)

Rabuka replied immediately

Mrs Jokapeci Koroi President

Fiji Labour Party Suva.

Dear Mrs Koroi,

I acknowledge the proposals outlined in your letter (2 June 1992) delivered this morning.

I have considered your proposals favourably and agree to take action on all the issues, namely the constitution, VAT, labour reforms and land tenure on the basis suggested in your letter.

I agree to hold discussions on the above issue in order to finalise the machinery to progress the matter further.

Yours Faithfully

S. L. Rabuka (Major) General President.

Significantly, the Fiji Labour Party also obtained an undertaking from the Fijian Nationalist Party and the Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua, which, according to some sources, had been instrumental in initiating the dialogue between Rabuka and Labour. These two parties' five parliamentarians (Butadroka, Gavidu, Lepani Tonitonivanua, Ratu Mosese Varasikete Tuisawau and Mosese Tuisawau), and the nationalist-minded independent, Kolonio Qiqiwaqa, wrote to the Labour Party: 'We give our assurance that should the President accept his nomination we will support your conditions as set out by the new Prime Minister'.

This stunning development left many in Fiji and outside gasping and shaking their heads in confusion. Labour supporting Rabuka? And the Nationalists agreeing with Labour's demands, among them the review of the constitution? Rabuka's courting of Labour's (or anyone else's) support is simply explained: he desperately needed the numbers Labour could deliver. Mahendra Chaudhry suggested that Labour supported Rabuka probably more for reasons of public consumption than out of genuine conviction; Rabuka was 'a changed man', who had admitted being used 'by certain chiefs' for their own purposes (*Fiji Times*, 2 June 1992). Moreover, Rabuka had been an ally in the resolution of the industrial disputes, whereas Kamikamica's policies had precipitated them. Some Labour leaders saw Kamikamica as a Mara 'puppet', and nothing was less acceptable to them than Mara's continuing influence, however indirect or slight that influence might be. Politics played its part too. By supporting Rabuka, and hence the next government, the Labour strategists hoped to deal a deathblow to the National Federation Party.

Some Labour leaders thought themselves the real winners in the 1992 elections. The party that had been given little chance of electoral success had managed to insert itself centrally into the national political process. Labour, they thought, would be the tail wagging the dog, or, as one of them said to me, while they could not be kings, they would be king-makers. Such euphoric thinking was short-lived, for, once installed, Rabuka went back to his old ways, changing his mind or denying the substance of the deals he had made. He refused to review the value-added tax, as he had promised, and he dismissed any urgency to review the constitution. Three months after the election, he said he wanted a constitution 'that's totally Fijian-oriented', and expressed sympathy for the Fijian Nationalist Party's

wish to repatriate the Indo-Fijians to India (*Canberra Times*, 1 October 1992). In December, he mooted the idea of a government of national unity, with what seriousness and commitment remained to be seen. With his own support base to safeguard, and his public support among ordinary nationalist Fijians high, Rabuka was in no hurry to keep his promises. Promises, his utterances implied, were made to be broken.

Rabuka was sitting on the horns of a dilemma. Nationalist-minded Fijians would remind him of his oft-repeated promise to fulfil his stated goals of the coup, while Labour and others would hold him accountable for his promises to them to lead Fiji toward a more just society. Then there were people within his own party, with different allegiances and with personal ambitions, who regarded him as an unwelcome intruder, an illegitimate usurper of their own power. Clearly, Rabuka was in an unenviable position. Leading the Fijian ship of state through turbulent, uncharted waters would require vision, skill, tact and patience.

Rabuka, however, was not the only one who faced a dilemma. The Fijian people themselves were caught between the competing demands of two worlds, neither of which they could easily hope to escape. On the one hand was the call to retreat from the modern world, seek succour in traditional custom, and entrust power 'to a few well-meaning and knowledgeable people' because 'majority rule can turn into the rule of prejudice and the power of the many to violate the rights of the few' (Ravuvu 1980:x). On the other hand was the call by the Fijian Political Party, sponsored by the chiefs, to promote 'a more rapid movement from subsistence activities to commercial enterprises and paid employment...to encourage greater economic freedom and competition and allow world market forces to determine prices and production for export and local markets through an efficient and private enterprise sector' (Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei Manifesto). There was a contradiction here that the elections, caught in the politics of race and regionalism, failed to address; it could not be ignored, or ignored at the peril of the people of Fiji.

## Notes

- 1 In May 1992 F\$1.00 was equal to US\$1.47.
- 2 From his manifesto, a copy of which is in the author's possession.
- 3 A copy of this document is in the author's possession. The quotes following are from the same document.