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## A time to change

The 1990s was a decade of unexpected political change in Fiji, confounding conventional wisdom about power sharing arrangements in that troubled country. For the sheer momentum and unpredictability of events, it rivalled the 1960s, Fiji's decade of decolonisation—a time of industrial strikes where violence was threatened, keenly contested elections and by-elections, and tense conferences about which constitutional systems suited Fiji's multiethnic society. The 1990s, too, Fiji's decade of progressive political democratisation, had its tension and turbulence, false starts and extended detours as its people grappled with the unsettling aftermath of the coups and struggled to devise a constitutional order suited to its situation.

The decade began on a divided note, as the architects of the coups of 1987 attempted to frame a constitution to entrench Fijian political control within a nominally democratic framework. That goal was enshrined in an interim constitution promulgated on 25 July 1990. Contested and opposed by Indo-Fijians and others marginalised by it, and denounced by the international community, who were affronted by its disregard for universal human rights conventions, the constitution was reviewed by an independent commission five years later. The commission recommended a more inclusive, non-racial system of representation while protecting the legitimate interests and concerns of the different communities. Two years later, most of the commission's recommendations, except for the significant reversal of the proportion of open and reserved seats, were incorporated in a new constitution

approved unanimously by parliament and blessed by the all-powerful Great Council of Chiefs. Within ten years, Fiji had travelled the gamut from coup to constitutionalism like few other countries.

In May 1999, Fiji went to the polls under the revised constitution. ‘Fiji’s general elections now under way are expected to see the three-party coalition led by outgoing prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka emerge as the largest block in the new House of Representatives’, wrote one respected observer after voting began, echoing virtually every observer of the Fijian scene. The report went on: ‘The coalition conducted the most coherent campaign, making the most of the advantages of incumbency, and Rabuka was clearly the dominant figure in campaigning’ (*Pacific Report*, 10 May 1999).<sup>1</sup> The Fiji voters delivered a dramatically different verdict, electing by a landslide a newly formed, fractious, ‘People’s Coalition’ consisting of the Fiji Labour Party, the Party of National Unity (PANU) and the Fijian Association Party (FAP), with Labour winning 37 of the 71 seats in the House of Representatives, enough to govern alone. The other coalition of the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT), the National Federation Party (NFP) and the United General Party (UGP), suffered a massive defeat, with the NFP losing every seat, and the SVT winning only 8. The shock caused by this would be felt for a long time.

Ironies abounded. Against all odds and all expectations, an Indo-Fijian, Mahendra Pal Chaudhry, was appointed prime minister, a prospect that would have appeared implausible just a few days earlier. More baffling still was that Chaudhry had formed a coalition with the Fijian Association, whose overtures for political support to form a government in 1992 he had rebuffed. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, whom Chaudhry had regarded as the evil genius behind the country’s recent political troubles, was now hailed as an ally, a statesman providing sage advice to an inexperienced, hastily cobbled together administration representing divergent agendas and speaking with discordant voices. On the other side of the divide, NFP’s Jai Ram Reddy had joined hands with SVT leader Rabuka whom he had refused to support—but whom Chaudhry had supported—for prime minister a few years back.

The two dominant figures of contemporary politics, widely praised for their leadership in the constitution review, became generals without

armies. Rabuka resigned from parliament to become (a commoner) chairman of the Great Council of Chiefs and the Commonwealth Secretary General's peace envoy to Solomon Islands. From coup-maker to international peace negotiator—it was a remarkable journey. For Reddy, also widely respected for his contribution to the country's healing, the results were a fateful replay of history. His party, under A.D. Patel, had played a leading role in Fiji's independence struggle but was consigned to the wilderness of the opposition benches for a generation. Now once again, he and his party were dealt a crushing blow and seemed destined to be consigned to the political margins after helping deliver the best constitution Fiji had ever had and laying the foundations of a truly multiracial democracy. Parties which had played a marginal or negligible role in formulating the new constitution were now poised to enjoy its benefits. The vanquished of 1987 had emerged victorious in 1999.

The conduct of the campaign and its outcome were determined by specific provisions of the new constitution. The first important feature was the provision for electing members of parliament, in particular the House of Representatives (the Senate being an appointed body). Of the 71 seats in the house, 46 are elected on a reserved, communal basis, with 23 contested by Fijian communal candidates, 19 by Indo-Fijians, 3 by general electors and 1 by the Council of Rotuma. For these seats, the candidates, as well as the voters, belong to the same ethnic category. The remaining 25 are open (common roll) seats, with ethnic restriction for neither voters nor candidates. These open seats are an innovation for Fiji, designed to lead gradually but decisively away from communal to non-racial politics. Under the 1990 constitution, all seats were communally reserved for the three ethnic communities (37 for Fijians, 27 for Indo-Fijians, and 5 for general electors). The 1970 (independence) constitution had a curious mixture of communal and cross-voting national seats where the ethnicity of the candidates was specified but all voted for them. The way in which the open seats were contested proved crucial to the outcome in some constituencies and helped determine the overall result.

The 1997 constitution also provided for a new alternative, or preferential, voting system, to replace the archaic first-past-the-post system inherited at independence. The alternative voting system was recommended by the Constitution Review Commission. The ballot paper

required voters to vote either above the line, accepting the party's allocation of preferences, or below the line, where they could rank the candidates themselves. Most voted above the line, and this had an important bearing on the outcome of the election.

The third feature of the constitution which affected the outcome of the election was the mandatory provision for power sharing, entitling any political party with more than 10 per cent of seats in the lower house to a place in cabinet (in proportion to its percentage of seats). The party with the most number of seats provides the prime minister, who allocates portfolios in cabinet. Because of this provision for a multiparty cabinet, the parties in the winning People's Coalition formed only a loose coalition among themselves, leaving the details of power sharing and leadership to be decided after the elections. This tactic gave them flexibility and internal leverage. The NFP, SVT and UGP, on the other hand, formed a binding pre-election coalition in a more conventional mould.

The campaign was the most relaxed in living memory. Trading preferences with other parties dampened what would have been a fiery campaign. For once, race was relegated to the background because both coalitions were multiracial. The constitutional provision for mandatory power sharing also made political parties wary of being too aggressive towards each other because of the possibility of working together in cabinet later. The multiparty cabinet concept also erased the winner-takes-all mentality. The long and difficult negotiations preceding the promulgation of the new constitution had created goodwill and understanding and cross-cultural friendship among candidates facing each other in the election. The fact that the constitution had been approved unanimously by the parliament, endorsed by the Great Council of Chiefs and warmly welcomed by the international community also had a calming effect.

The fear that rights of the indigenous Fijians could be eroded if a non-Fijian ruled had often been used to mobilise opposition against that prospect, as happened in 1987. People were generally ignorant—or uninformed—about the way their rights and interests were protected in the constitution. That was no longer true. The new constitution was homegrown, devised in a transparent manner after wide consultation and in full glare of national publicity and international scrutiny. This was not the case with the 1970 constitution, which was negotiated in

secrecy, approved in London and never subjected to a vote. The 1990 constitution was also promulgated by presidential decree with no popular participation.

For the first time, the legitimate needs and concerns of all communities were protected in a manner broadly acceptable to them. The Great Council of Chiefs, whose constitutional role was recognised, could veto legislation that affected issues of concern to the Fijian people; it nominated both the president and the vice president; the ownership of Fijian land according to Fijian custom was recognised along with their and the Rotuman people's right to governance through separate administrative systems. The compact, a set of principles which all governments were enjoined to observe, stipulated that where the interests of the different communities were in conflict, 'the paramountcy of Fijian interests as a protective principle continues to apply, so as to ensure that the interests of the Fijian community are not subordinated to the interests of any other community'. And all communities were assured that affirmative action and social justice programs would be 'based on an allocation of resources broadly acceptable to all communities'. Clarifying the principles and procedures of governance helped greatly in allaying fears and doubts.

## **Political parties**

Twenty-one political parties contested the 1999 election.<sup>2</sup> Many were obscure in origin and purpose and insignificant in their impact. If they were known at all, this reflected their entertainment value rather than their vision. Among these were the Natural Law Party, the Coalition of Independent Nationals Party, the Viti Levu Dynamic Multiracial Democratic Party, the Tawavanua Party, the National Democratic Party, and the Farmers and General Workers Coalition Party. The main actors were in the two coalitions, and in the Christian Democratic Alliance, which emerged on the eve of the campaign.

### **The SVT/NFP/UGP coalition**

This was a predictable coalition of three self-described mainstream parties representing the three main ethnic communities, standing on the basis of a firm pre-election agreement about power sharing. The members

of the coalition had worked together, and they promised to continue their dialogue and consensus. Sitiveni Rabuka and Jai Ram Reddy, leading the two main parties, had contributed significantly in securing the approval of the new constitution in parliament. Rabuka had invited Reddy to address the Great Council of Chiefs to ask for their blessing of the constitution. The two had set up a joint parliamentary committee to resolve the complex issue of expiring leases under the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act (ALTA). Rabuka and Reddy, so different from each other in training and temperament—one a soldier, open and intuitive, the other a lawyer, reserved and cautious—enjoyed a remarkable personal rapport, which they promised to translate into continuing cooperation.

Both leaders extolled the virtues of a pre-election coalition. Reddy said that a coalition that shares common goals, ideas and policies is more likely to succeed than a post-election multiparty government of hitherto mutually hostile forces.

[Another] compelling case is the need to bring together the different racial groups as partners in the electoral process in order to reduce communal tensions that have historically characterised our elections of the past. We want to put an end to the long years of political rivalry between our different communities and usher in a new era of political cooperation—consistent with the aims and objectives of the constitution. The valuable experience we have acquired during the making of the new constitution and the immense goodwill that has been shown by the Fijian people can be made the basis for solving many of our difficult problems such as ALTA, crime, unemployment, health and education. They cannot be solved through confrontation but by working together (*Daily Post*, 26 March 1999).

The coalition agreement, signed by Rabuka, Reddy and UGP leader David Pickering, provided that the leader of the SVT, whoever it might be, would be the coalition's nominee for prime minister, while the NFP leader would become deputy prime minister, with the UGP being guaranteed a cabinet seat. Second, the parties agreed to share the 25 open seats, with SVT getting 14 and NFP 11. The two parties agreed to give their first preference to each other's designated candidates for the open seats, and not field parallel candidates or support independents or other candidates. The coalition would last until the next election, with the parties working together as coalition partners even if one party won enough seats to govern alone. Finally, the agreement provided for regular consultations to develop policy or resolve difficulties, but agreed to

‘respect particular party positions in agreed areas where special group interests may be affected’.

This escape clause was necessary because there were areas where the two parties had diametrically opposed positions. The privatisation of public assets was one, and it highlights the difficulty for the coalition in mounting an effective campaign as a unit. What one partner advertised as a major achievement, the other saw as a public policy disaster. The SVT government had sold 49 per cent of Amalgamated Telecom Holdings Limited for F\$253 million to the Fiji National Provident Fund, and 51 per cent of the National Bank of Fiji to Colonial Mutual Insurance Company for F\$9.5 million, ostensibly to promote competition in the private sector. It had also sold 17 per cent of Air Pacific for F\$26.8 million to foreign airlines ‘to strengthen the airline’s international network and [increase] tourist arrivals’, and 51 per cent of the Government Shipyard for F\$3.2 million to improve its ‘competitiveness and [win] international orders’ (Ministry of National Planning Information 1998). These sales, the government argued, would free up resources for growth in the private sector and enable it to ‘focus more on improving the efficiency of its operations in the priority sectors, i.e. core and essential services’. The NFP, on other hand, opposed the privatisation of state enterprises that were yielding high returns or covered strategic resources, such as the international airport and shipping facilities, or those that were undertaken purely to fund recurrent fiscal deficits. It supported only those privatisation efforts where the state had no legitimate economic interests or the enterprises were unprofitable or relied on permanent grants and subsidies. The People’s Coalition was unambiguous in its opposition: ‘strategic utilities such as water, electricity, telecommunication and civil aviation facilities must remain in public hands as viable units’ (People’s Coalition campaign material).

Another issue dividing the parties was the status of state land. There are two types of state (formerly crown) land: Schedule A (52,513 ha) refers to land owned by landowning *mataqali* deemed to have become extinct by the time of Cession in 1874; Schedule B (43,113 ha) land which was unoccupied and had no claimants when the Native Lands Commission met. This land was managed by the state. In the early 1990s, facing pressure from landless Fijians and with a view to gaining political

mileage, the government devised a bill to return this land to Fijians and provide for land-management to be transferred to the Native Land Trust Board, which also managed native land on behalf of Fijian landlords. The NFP criticised the government's proposal. It also opposed the policy of purchasing freehold land and giving it to the Fijians. It had been particularly vocal in denouncing the setting up of the Viti Corps, a government initiative to provide agricultural training to Fijian youth on a freehold property it had purchased for F\$7 million. Other areas of disagreement included strategies for creating employment, strengthening economic growth and poverty alleviation.

The coalition agreement compromised both parties. The SVT could not highlight its pro-Fijian policies for fear of alienating supporters of its coalition partner, while the NFP had to soften its public opposition to the government. They were caught on the horns of a dilemma. As ethnic parties they were expected to champion the sectional interests of their communities; and yet, as parties which had worked together to fashion a new constitution and lay the foundations of a new multiracialism. They could not afford to adopt an 'ethnicist' position which might have sharpened their appeal among supporters because this would hurt the larger cause of reconciliation. The two parties were not standing on the joint record; they were standing on their promise to work together in future. It was a critical distinction that was lost on the electorate.

### The People's coalition

The People's coalition was the other main multiracial coalition. Unlike the SVT/NFP/UGP coalition, it was loosely structured, and details of the agreement and internal understandings about power sharing were never released to the public. The coalition consisted of the Fiji Labour Party, the Party of National Unity and the Fijian Association. Each had its own history and agenda, but they were united by one common, overriding ambition: to remove Rabuka from power and (for Labour) to supplant Reddy and the National Federation Party as the party of the Indo-Fijians.

The Fiji Labour Party was formed in 1985 as a multiracial party backed by the powerful trade unions. Dr Timoci Bavadra, an indigenous Fijian medical doctor, was its founding president and leader, with the powerful

Fiji Public Servants Association leader Mahendra Chaudhry as its mastermind and general secretary. Labour won the 1987 election in coalition with the NFP, only to be deposed in a coup a month later. The partnership did not last long, the rift erupting into a bitter disagreement over participation in the 1992 election. NFP participated, while Labour decided not to, until the last minute. Labour's support for Sitiveni Rabuka as prime minister following the 1992 elections, drove the two parties further apart. Although they returned to make a joint submission to the Constitution Review Commission, the rift was widening. By the mid 1990s, Labour was a shadow of its earlier self, with most of its founding members having left for other parties, including many Fijians. By the time of the election, it had enticed some back. The FLP, although supported predominantly by Indo-Fijians, had continued to field Fijian candidates in previous elections. And it kept nurturing its support base among workers and farmers and the trade unions.

The spectacularly misnamed western Viti Levu-based Party of National Unity was the brainchild of Apisai Tora, the quintessential maverick of Fiji politics. In a political career spanning nearly four decades, Tora had been a member of nearly every political party in Fiji, beginning with the Western Democratic Party in 1964, progressing to the National Democratic Party, the National Federation Party, the Alliance, the All National Congress and the Fijian Association Party. He had been a founding member of the nationalist Taukei Movement, and an enthusiastic supporter of the coups. But throughout his tortuous—not to say tortured—career, he had been a fierce champion of western Fijian interests, which, he argued, had been neglected in a government dominated by chiefs of the eastern establishment. PANU was Tora's latest vehicle to redress the longstanding grievance of the western Fijians and to secure them an appropriate place in the Fijian sun. All the nation's wealth-generating industries were concentrated in the west: sugar, tourism, gold and pine as well as the international airport and the hydro-electric power stations, Tora argued; and he wanted a commensurate share of national power.

PANU had the blessing of prominent western chiefs, including the Tui Vuda—the paramount chief of western Fiji and vice president—Ratu Josefa Iloilo, Tui Nawaka Ratu Apisai Naevo, Tui Sabeto Ratu Kaliova

Mataitoga, Tui Vitogo Ratu Josefa Sovasova and Marama na Tui Ba Adi Sainimili Cagilaba. The list was impressive, but the chiefs' support did not carry as much influence as before (see *The Review*, May 1998). Tora broached the idea of a coalition with the SVT first, and wanted a seat-sharing arrangement that would recognise and consolidate his influence in the west. He was rebuffed by western Fijian members of the SVT, especially Isimeli Bose and Ratu Etuate Tavai. Tora, they felt, was a spent force, his reputation for integrity and probity irreparably tainted by his impressive record of political bed-hopping. Moreover, the seat-sharing formula sought by Tora would have ended SVT's influence in western Viti Levu, a prospect no serious party aspiring for national leadership could countenance. Tora then turned to Labour, which responded favourably. It was a coalition of convenience; Labour gave Tora a wider platform on which, relying on his cunning, he no doubt hoped to enlarge with his own agenda. Tora promised Labour western Fijian support and assistance in resolving the issue of the expiring leases. The land issue was serious. On the eve of the election, Ba chiefs, who command the largest province, wanted 87 per cent of the leases not to be renewed (34,634 out of 39,725 ha) and in Sabeto, Nawaka, Nadi and Vuda, the chiefs wanted 92 per cent of the leases not to be renewed (12,728 out of 13,704 ha). Tora held—or seemed to hold—powerful cards.

The Fijian Association was the third member of the People's Coalition. It was formed in the early 1990s by Fijians opposed to Rabuka, ridiculing his leadership and attacking his moral character. Its founder was Josefata Kamikamica, an affable, mild-mannered but politically naive long-term head of the Native Land Trust Board and a member of the Mara-led post-coup Interim Administration (in which he had served as finance minister). He unsuccessfully challenged Rabuka for prime minister in 1992, and failed to get elected in 1994 and in later by-elections. After his death in 1998, the Fijian Association was led by Adi Kuini Bavadra Speed, the remarried widow of the founding Labour leader and herself one-time leader of the Fiji Labour Party and president of the All National Congress. The party's social philosophy was broadly similar to Labour's. In fact, nearly all its leading Fijian candidates were former members or friends of the Labour Party. But the party also contained a strange assortment of political refugees from other parties, with their own agendas

and ambitions, united by the overriding desire to see Rabuka defeated. Sometimes the Fijian Association gave the impression of having a ‘schizophrenic personality’,<sup>3</sup> of saying one thing and doing another. One of its parliamentarians, Viliame Cavubati, was standing for the SVT while another, Dr Fereti Dewa, missed out on selection and launched a scathing attack on the party leaders. Its parliamentary leader, the ever-unpredictable Ratu Finau Mara, had left politics for a diplomatic career.

The People’s Coalition had few common understandings, which invited attacks from the rival coalition. Who would lead the coalition if it won? ‘The party with the most seats’, the People’s Coalition responded. Would that leader be a Fijian? The answer was similarly vague. The coalition had an equally flexible arrangement about allocating seats in the open constituencies. In some constituencies, they supported a common candidate, while elsewhere it fielded parallel candidates. Where it fielded parallel candidates, the coalition partners were given their second preference. This worked well for the most part, but created problems in some places. PANU, for example, expected to be allowed to field candidates in western constituencies with substantial Fijian population, but Labour disagreed and fielded its own, poaching some of Tora’s prominent supporters and potential candidates, among them Ratu Tevita Momoedonu. Tora’s own seat was contested by Labour, whose candidate beat him. Outmanoeuvred, Tora refused to attend any of People’s Coalition rallies. Towards the end of the campaign, he became a vocal critic of the Labour Party, chiding Labour president Jokapeci Koroi for not forgiving Rabuka for his past actions and accusing Chaudhry of treachery (*Fiji Times*, 7 May 1999). Tora refused to give preferences to his coalition partner, the Fijian Association Party, which had fielded candidates against his own. But by then, he mattered little. For once, the Machiavellian politician had been marginalised.

### Veitokani Ni Lewenivanua Vakaristo/Christian Democratic Alliance (VLV/CDA)

This party was launched on 27 March, on the eve of the election, by various Fijians opposed to Sitiveni Rabuka and his government. Its support came from three sources. First, there were those who opposed the 1997 constitution. Rabuka and his party had ‘failed the Fijian people

miserably',<sup>4</sup> the VLV charged. Rabuka had given away too much; he had 'exploited the indigenous Fijian institutions for his own glorification, even to the extent of selling out on the rights and interests of Fijians'. Unless the 'core interests' of the Fijians were addressed, there would be no political stability in the country.

We remind the PM of the VLV's primary platform that unless there is stability in the indigenous Fijian community, there will be no stability in this country in the future. It will all be fruitless and a waste of effort for all who have been trying to build and make Fiji a better place for all to live in.

In essence, they wanted to restore those provisions of the 1990 constitution that would have kept power in Fijian hands and supported Fijian paramountcy.

Other members and supporters came from sections of the Methodist Church, who wanted to turn Fiji into a Christian state (*Daily Post*, 31 March 1999). The very public blessing given to the party by the affable but malleable president of the Methodist Church, Reverend Tomasi Kanailagi, and the presence within it of such fire-breathing figures as former president Manasa Lasaro and Tanielia Tabu, was powerfully symbolic. These people wanted the Sunday ban reintroduced, which reversed the stance the church had taken when Dr Ilaitia Tuwere was president in the mid 1990s. Tuwere had argued that turning Fiji into a Christian state would not 'make it a better place for everyone to live in. It will neither further the cause of Christianity nor adequately meet the present wish to safeguard Fijian interests and identity'. And attention to 'man's careless disregard of the environment' was 'more urgent than Sunday observance' (*Daily Post*, 31 March 1999). Much depends on the character and vision of the person at the helm of the church. Nonetheless, religion is close to the heart of many Fijians, and most would not oppose the Christian state proposal. But others wanted to manipulate this deep religious attachment for their own ends.

The VLV claimed the support of 'members of the chiefly establishment'. To prove it, they made traditional approaches to Ratu Mara (Tui Nayau) and Adi Lady Lala Mara (Tui Dreketi), as well as Tui Vuda Ratu Josefa Iloilo. Most people believed that the president silently supported the party and encouraged his former supporters to do likewise.<sup>5</sup> Close members of his own family were contesting the election on the VLV ticket,

including his daughter and son-in-law, and Poseci Bune, who was expected to 'strengthen and consolidate the Mara/Ganilau dynasty' (*Daily Post*, 29 March 1999). Fairly or unfairly, the president was accused of harbouring dynastic ambitions. Many Fijians remarked on Mara's cool relations with Rabuka, and his desire to see the prime minister defeated. Many founding members of the Fijian Association were known to the president as members of the Diners Club formed in the early 1990s with whom he shared his experiences and reflections on politics. Rabuka had defeated Lady Lala for the presidency of the SVT, which was not forgotten or forgiven. And Rabuka's claims, made before and during the election, that he had been used to stage the coup, raised questions about who else was involved, including members of the chiefly establishment which now supported the VLV. Rabuka had said that he was the 'fall guy' who refused to fall. His comment, in Lau of all places, that a commoner candidate could be more accessible than a chiefly one, raised further questions about his loyalty to chiefs (*Daily Post*, 7 May 1999). Mara's relations with Rabuka, never warm, had become decidedly chilly.

As the campaign proceeded, the VLV attempted to distance itself from its more extreme positions, and proclaimed its commitment to socially progressive policies. These included reorganising and restructuring regional development, improving the 'economic, social and human conditions in the rural areas' by assisting the provinces to implement 'infrastructure plans and projects, industrial, business and commercial plans and projects, agriculture, forestry and fisheries plans and projects, and social/human development plans and projects' (whatever these phrases, allegedly written in New York by an expatriate former Fiji public servant (Peter Halder), might mean), facilitating Fijian ownership of business, industry and commerce in each province and assisting Fijian landowners to 'utilise their lands for their own economic development and upliftment' (*The Review*, 14 April 1999). Bune, an experienced civil servant and former representative at the United Nations, got himself elected as party leader over Ratu Epeli Ganilau, the army commander who had resigned to contest the Lau open seat; but his elevation was contested by powerful party insiders who questioned his background and personal and moral credentials.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the VLV fielded some well known and experienced candidates, including Ganilau and Adi Koila

Mara Nailatikau, Fijian academic Asesela Ravuvu, trade unionist Salote Qalo, and lawyers Kitione Vuataki and Naipote Vere.

Among the smaller Fijian parties, the Fijian Nationalist Vanua Tako Lavo Party was the most prominent. Led by longtime Fijian nationalist Sakiasi Butadroka, it was the latest reincarnation of the original Fijian Nationalist Party founded in 1975 to keep 'Fiji for the Fijians'. Twenty years later, it had changed little, except in name. The party rejected the 1997 constitution as a sell-out of Fijian interests, and wanted Rabuka punished for betraying the aims of the coup, which, they said, was to entrench Fijian political control. Its manifesto proclaimed that 'in addition to the normal guarantees for 75 per cent support from the Great Council of Chiefs for amendments concerning the Fijian people, we will ensure that 100 per cent support will be needed from all 14 Provincial Councils before any changes can be made to the iron clad guarantees affecting the Fijian people'. The name of the country would be changed from the Fiji Islands to Fiji because 'we want to be identified overseas as Fijians not Fiji Islanders' (*Daily Post*, 16 April 1999). The Fijian language would be taught in all schools, crown land returned to the indigenous people, and special bodies would be set up to exploit natural resources in the interest of the Fijian people. Fine words, but the party was now a caricature of its former self, not a force of consequence. Some leading members (Isireli Vuibau) had joined other parties, while ex-Taukei Movement member Ilesia Duvuloco was embroiled in financial difficulties. After the elections, Butadroka changed his trademark blood-red bow tie signifying violence if Indians ever challenged Fijian right to rule, to a black bow tie, mourning the political loss 'of the Fijian race'.

## Issues

For the SVT/NFP/UGP coalition, the main question was which party or coalition was best placed to provide political stability. Reddy spoke for the coalition.

Experience around the world shows that political stability is a precondition for economic and social progress. Without political stability we will not be able to achieve anything. Political stability will lead to enlightened and progressive policies which, in turn, will generate business confidence, investment, economic growth and, above all, jobs for our unemployed (Reddy's final campaign address, 3 May 1999).

The NFP had always been the majority party of the Indo-Fijian community, while the SVT 'is without doubt the majority Fijian party representing the widest cross-section of the Fijian community', and the UGP was the largest party of the general electors. This coalition, he said, broadly based, representative, and with a record of working together was 'best placed to provide that political stability which will form the foundation for progress on economic and social issues'.

The SVT paraded its achievements, reminding Fijians of its pro-Fijian activities: more scholarships for Fijians, financial assistance, the promise to revert crown land to Fijian landowners. It reminded them of the new hospitals and health centres in Kadavu, Lami, Nabouwalu, Rabi and Rakiraki; improvements in infrastructure, including better shipping services to the islands under the Shipping Franchising Scheme; completion of major bridges; rural electrification; improved water supply in rural areas; the poverty alleviation scheme (F\$4.4 million per year); and better housing for low income earners. But these achievements did not impress the voters, who remembered the scandals that had brought the country into disrepute and close to bankruptcy. There was widespread suspicion that a well-connected few had done well, rather than the bulk of the citizens. In western Viti Levu, opposition parties said publicly that their region had been neglected, as in the past, and that the bulk of the development projects had gone elsewhere.

The SVT claimed credit for 'wide consultation in the comprehensive review and promulgation of the new constitution, which laid the foundation for a united, free and democratic multiracial Fiji' (Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei campaign material). It claimed credit for Fiji's readmission to the Commonwealth, and for restoring Fiji's link with the British monarchy. The Fijian electorate was unmoved. Many thought that the revised constitution had somehow whittled down the Fijian position and deprived them of rights. The government claimed credit for establishing the 'framework for a multiparty government', when most Fijians wanted a Fijian government, with some participation from the other communities, not equal partnership. The opposition Fijian parties, with diverse agendas and ideologies, united to condemn the SVT for compromising Fijian interests.

Rabuka's firm and decisive leadership had indeed been instrumental in negotiating the constitution. Even his closest colleagues in cabinet had opposed the report of the Constitution Review Commission, and had tried to have the constitution amended at the last minute. Eight of the fourteen Fijian provinces had rejected the report. The hero of 1987 had become the villain of 1999, deserted by close supporters, friends and high chiefs with agendas of their own. They all wanted him defeated.

The NFP presented Rabuka to sceptical Indo-Fijian audiences as the leader best suited to take Fiji into the next millennium. Rabuka responded by apologising for the pain the coup had caused the Indo-Fijian community, and espoused an inclusive vision.

I believe we cannot build a nation by tearing people down. No matter how they arrived in Fiji, they are a part of Fiji society. This is their land to till and make productive. We owe it to the indentured labourers, to cotton planters for what we have now. Let us leave our differences aside, have common interests in our hearts to build a beautiful Fiji (Speech in Labasa, 10 April 1999).

Rabuka appeared genuine in his contrition, but it came late, and in the heat of an election campaign it sounded expedient. As one observer put it, 'commitment to multiracialism and forgiveness for sins past' sounded all too vague. 'It is feel-good politics that blisters under the blowtorch of the Fijian Association Party-Labour call for new direction' (*Fiji Times*, 3 May 1999).

The promulgation of the new constitution became the main campaign platform for the NFP. Much had been achieved through dialogue and discussion with a mainstream Fijian party, and it promised to continue that approach. If the Indo-Fijian people wanted to resolve the land lease issue, they could only do so with the support of the main party of the Fijian people. It urged voters to take a longer-term view. Much had been accomplished, but much remained to be done. The NFP praised Rabuka as the man who had risked his political capital among his own people. They acknowledged his past misdeeds, but as Reddy said, 'this is the same person who has shown, by leading the revision of the constitution, that he believes in genuine multiracialism, not just in parliament but more importantly in government' (Reddy's final campaign address, 3 May 1999). He continued,

[w]e are not in a partnership with token Fijians and general voters, as in 1987, after which the coups took place. These parties will have the full force of their racial groups behind them. This coalition will have real political authority and social backing to tackle the problems of our country, for example crime and ALTA (Reddy's final campaign address, 3 May 1999).

NFP wanted to eschew the confrontational politics that had 'only result[ed] in misery for people'. Instead, they wanted to pursue 'moderation, reconciliation and tolerance of all races, regions and cultures that grace this beautiful country of ours'. Reddy reminded voters of his party's record in opposition: 'The country knows that we have been in the forefront of bringing these issues (corruption, mismanagement of the economy and inefficiencies) to the attention of the public, whenever the need has arisen'. Nonetheless, as Stewart Firth remarked, 'no answer could explain to an average Indian the reason why NFP leader Jai Ram Reddy formed a coalition with Sitiveni Rabuka's party' (*Fiji Times*, 18 May 1999).

The NFP heavily criticised Labour's allocation of preferences. In 22 seats, Labour gave its first or second preferences to the VLV, a party whose policies Labour had characterised as 'abhorrent, contrary to the spirit of our constitution and against the interests of the Indian community' (Fiji Labour Party campaign material). The VLV would reintroduce the Sunday ban, make Fiji a Christian state and change the constitution. The NFP placed the VLV last, and despite its competition with Labour it placed that party above the VLV 'as a matter of principle or morality'. For Labour, however, the election was not about principle and morality: it was about winning. To that end, it put those parties last that posed the greatest threat. Among these parties was the NFP, its main rival in the Indian communal seats. Labour's unorthodox tactic breached the spirit and intention of the preferential system of voting, where like-minded parties trade preferences among themselves and put those they are morally at odds with last. Political expediency and cold-blooded ruthlessness triumphed. Reddy was right about Labour's motives when he said that Labour wanted 'to get rid of Rabuka and the SVT [and Reddy and the NFP as well] at all cost'.

The constitution, by which the NFP had placed such store, was for Labour an accomplished fact and a non-issue. It made no mention of it

in the manifesto. When this issue was brought to the fore, Labour belittled Rabuka's and Reddy's roles, saying that the constitution was the work of the Constitution Review Commission and the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee. In any case, why should Rabuka be praised for rectifying a grievous mistake he had made in the first place. As Sir Vijay Singh put, 'in restoring the democratic constitution', Rabuka 'did the Indians no favour'. He 'restored what he had stolen in the first place. He is deserving of some mitigation. If you were a criminal in court and you did some right thing, the court will deal with you lightly but it won't reward you' (*Fijilive*, 19 May 1999). It was a harsh, unforgiving judgment on Rabuka, which did not take account of the fact that he had accomplished despite the difficult circumstances and the powerful opposition from within his own party. Moreover, Rabuka was not alone in carrying out the coups. Some of Sir Vijay's own former colleagues in the Alliance Party (and now Rabuka's bitter opponents) had joined the colonel in 1987 to overthrow the 1970 constitution. But these subtle points did not register.

Labour reminded the electorate of SVT's sorry record in government, and implicated the NFP in the mess, calling it the Rabuka-Reddy record. Labour catalogued the ills of the SVT government: mismanagement of public office, corruption at the top echelons of government, alarming crime rates, high unemployment levels, enforced redundancies in public enterprises brought about by privatisation and corporatisation, the high cost of living in an economy deep in recession with two consecutive years of negative growth, and dreadful infrastructure. This, Labour said, was the true record of the SVT government. The electorate understood. The sight of redundant workers at Nadi airport while the election was in progress reinforced the image of the government as uncaring and arrogant. The NFP said little; for Labour the pictures of the redundant workers were a godsend. 'The NFP', Labour president Koroï remarked, 'has been an ineffective opposition, frequently and actively supporting the repressive measures of a government whose sole aim is to remain in power permanently' (*Daily Post*, 2 April 1999). The electorate believed her.

Labour also promised policies and initiatives of its own. It would remove the 10 per cent value-added tax and customs duty from basic food and educational items, review taxation on savings and raise

allowances for dependents, provide social security for the aged and destitute, and lower interest rates on housing loans. If elected, Labour promised to repeal legislation requiring farmers to pay back the F\$27 million cash grant and crop rehabilitation loan made to drought-stricken farmers in 1998; establish a Land Use Commission, in consultation with landowners and tenants, to identify and access vacant lands; and oppose privatisation of strategic utilities such as water, electricity, telecommunications and civil aviation. 'We also believe that the overall control of the exploitation of natural resources such as forestry and fisheries must remain in state hands to maintain their sustainability. We will, therefore, reverse all moves to restructure and privatise them'.

Labour's partners broadly shared its policy platform, but their main target was Rabuka. The Fijian establishment, in whose name he had carried out the coup, jettisoned him as an ambitious commoner unfit to govern, a man who had overreached his authority and station. He had to be defeated almost at any cost. For Chaudhry, removing Reddy and his party was a priority.

## Results

Voting in Fiji was compulsory for the 428,000 registered voters, but only 393,673 voted. Of the votes cast, 8 per cent were invalid. There were roughly equal number of invalid votes among Fijians (8.7 per cent) and Indo-Fijians (8.5 per cent). The percentage of Fijians not voting was slightly higher (10.9 per cent) than among Indo-Fijians (7.5 per cent). The Labour Party won 37 of the 71 seats in the House of Representatives, and thus was entitled to form a government in its own right. Its coalition partner, the Fijian Association Party, won 11, PANU 4 and the Christian Democrats 3. The UGP won 2 seats, the SVT 8 and the NFP failed to win a seat. Fijian Nationalists won 2 seats and independents 4.

The Indian communal seats saw a two-way contest between Labour and the NFP. Labour won 108,743 of the 165,886 Indian communal votes cast (65.6 per cent of first preference votes) and the NFP 53,071 (32 per cent). Independents and other parties got 4,030 (2.4 per cent). Labour fared well in rural and urban constituencies, its electoral dominance evenly spread. Among the Fijian parties contesting the

communal seats, the SVT won 68,114 or 38 per cent of (first preference) Fijian votes, VLV 34,758 (19.4 per cent), Fijian Association Party 32,394 (18 per cent), PANU 17,149 (9.6 per cent), independents 7,335 (4.1 per cent), Nationalist Vanua Tako Lavo Party 16,353 (9.1 per cent) and Labour 3,590 (2 per cent). Labour's poor performance among Fijians should be seen in context. Although it fielded some Fijian candidates, Labour left Fijian constituencies largely to its Fijian partners. When the votes in the open seats are taken into account, there is evidence of large Fijian support for the party. There, of the 360,085 valid votes cast—428,146 were registered of whom 393,673 voted—Labour won 33.3 per cent of the votes, SVT 21 per cent, VLV 9.8 per cent, NFP 14.4 per cent, Nationalists 4.2 per cent, Fijian Association Party, 10.8 per cent, independents 2.1 per cent, United General Party 1.3 per cent and PANU 2.7 per cent.

Among general voters, 11,981 voted from a total of 14,029. That is, 14.6 per cent did not vote and of those who did, 8.2 per cent were invalid. The United General Party won 5,388 votes (49 per cent), Fijian Association Party 1,052 (9.6 per cent), independents 3,346 (30.4 per cent) and the Coalition of Independent Parties 1,156 (10 per cent). The strong support for independents centered on personalities (Leo Smith and Bill Aull who were prominent sitting parliamentarians).

Why the massive swing to Labour? The NFP argued that Indo-Fijian voters had taken revenge for the coups, that its pre-election coalition with Rabuka cost them the election. If NFP had not allied itself with the SVT and not revealed its hand, it would not have carried SVT's baggage. It would then have been able to mount an effective campaign in its traditional constituency and win enough seats to become a player in parliament. There is a grain of truth in this assertion. Certainly Labour advertised its campaign as a continuation of a brutally interrupted experiment of 1987, with Dr Timoci Bavadra's official portrait adorning many a campaign shed in western Viti Levu. Rabuka's public apologies unwittingly revived memories of disrupted careers, lost incomes and broken lives.<sup>7</sup> The NFP's pre-election coalition may have cost it votes, but would an alternative strategy have made much difference?

The answer is not at all clear. In the public mind, Reddy was already hitched to Rabuka through the constitutional review, and any attempt

by the two leaders to distance themselves from each other, after having worked so closely for so long, would have been counterproductive to the purported aims of moderation and reconciliation they espoused. If Reddy had publicly distanced himself from Rabuka, Labour would not have let the matter rest. They would have prodded and provoked and demanded to know why Reddy was not with the SVT leader. On the other side, the Fijian nationalists, unhappy with the new constitution, would have accused Reddy of treachery, and of using Rabuka and the Great Council of Chiefs to amend the constitution to suit the interests of his own community. The Fijian supporters of the SVT would have felt used and discarded.

Reddy argued that his party had taken the correct decision to ally with the SVT. The coalition, he said, was based on fundamental principles.

You don't abandon your coalition partners because they have done something wrong or they may be suddenly becoming unpopular. But I didn't see it that way. I saw the SVT as the mainstream Fijian party. They were founded by the chiefs. They seemed to have the support of the Fijian people. The important thing is that all these things we did with the utmost good faith. We did it because we believed in something. We believed that Indian and Fijian people and everybody else must be brought together in government (*The Review*, June 1999).

He had been honest with the electorate. His coalition decision was not 'a grievous error of principle as well as strategy', as some commentators noted, but a principled and courageous one.<sup>8</sup>

The NFP's problem was not so much in the message as in its failure to take it effectively to the voters. In hindsight, its focus on the constitution—great achievement that it was—to the virtual exclusion of any other issue was probably a mistake. Selling an untested constitution, however good, to a sceptical, suffering electorate was not the same as criticising a demonstrably flawed one, as it had done successfully in 1992 and 1994. The fact that it could not use its solid performance as an opposition party, now that it was in partnership with the party in government, weakened its campaign. In short, the NFP was caught in a trap. A frontal attack on the SVT would have polarised the main communities, revived old hostilities and taken the country back to the tired politics of ethnic confrontation. By holding fire on the SVT, the NFP opened itself to the charge of complicity and collaboration.

Labour's message was sharper and more effective, its criticism of government relentless. Its focus on the bread and butter issues of employment, better health, social welfare and accountable government sat well with the electorate. Moreover, it had an extensive network to communicate that message. The Fiji Public Service Association, of which Mahendra Chaudhry was the head, covered the public sector unions. The National Farmers' Union, of which Chaudhry again was the head, galvanised the farming community. And the Fiji Teachers' Union, headed by Pratap Chand, a Labour candidate, reached out to primary and secondary teachers who play a pivotal social role in the community. They shape opinion and influence events. Farmers, workers and teachers were thus covered. The NFP's structure was less focused. Its once powerful working committees had become moribund, its decision-making and consultative function taken over by the Management Board. This change made the party more businesslike, but damaged its links to the grassroots.

Labour appealed to people who were desperate, direct victims of government policies—400 redundant employees at the Civil Aviation Authority, 15,000 garment factory workers and their families, squatters and residents of low-cost Housing Authority flats, people threatened with job losses at the Fiji Electricity Authority, Telecom Fiji, the Fiji Sugar Corporation and in the public service, already reeling from the 20 per cent devaluation of the Fijian dollar. NFP's appeal was less focused. The Indo-Fijian community, whose interests it sought to protect, was increasingly divided in its aspirations. The middle class, a constituency traditionally receptive to its message of gradual progressive change and with a keen eye on the long term, had been declining through migration. Many had left since the coups while Labour's base of workers, farmers and teachers remained intact. For them, the immediate social and economic concerns were more important than saving for a rainy day. As one observer put it, the 'NFP's achievements on the constitution and talk of racial harmony were abstract issues while Labour promised tangible gains' (*The Review*, June 1999). Such 'tangible gains' included reducing prices, increasing exports and creating jobs. The NFP was perceived as a rich person's party, not caring about the concerns of ordinary people.<sup>9</sup>

In the sugar belt, the heartland of the Indo-Fijian community, Labour outmanoeuvred the NFP. The National Farmers' Union had displaced

the NFP-backed Fiji Cane Growers' Association as the most effective voice of the farmers. Ironically, it was the NFP which had paved the way for Chaudhry's entry into sugar politics after the coups, handing over to him a constituency that had long been the party's own but which Chaudhry would convert into his own solid base. To the drought-stricken farmers, Labour promised relief and concrete proposals: addressing the problem of milling inefficiencies, improving the transportation system, exploring diversification into agro-based industries, and writing off the F\$27 million crop rehabilitation loan. Labour told the farmers that Reddy had opposed the cash grant, which patently misrepresented his position. The NFP cried foul, but the damage was done. The sugar belt turned to Labour as never before.

Rabuka's defeat was caused by several factors. His government's scandal-ridden performance was one. For many ordinary Fijians, life had not improved much since the coups. As Tamarisi Digitaki put it, at the grassroots level

[t]he standards of living have remained largely unchanged from ten years ago. While his [Rabuka's] government's performance on the national and international fronts has been commendable, it is in the rural areas that the goods have failed to be delivered. Poor roads, water supply, communication services, education facilities and shipping services to the islands only give rural people more reason to vote the government out of office (*The Review*, February 1998).

Rabuka conceded that the complacency of his parliamentarians and a dormant party structure cost him votes, saying that 'while party leaders were busy resolving national issues, no one was really looking into bread and butter issues affecting its supporters' (*The Review*, June 1999). Labour and its partners capitalised on this disenchantment affecting rural Fiji.

Rabuka's pursuit of moderate, conciliatory politics was always going to risk being outflanked by more extremist parties. Parties that court moderation in an ethnically divided society tempt fate. Rabuka was accused of selling out Fijian interests, just as Reddy was accused of playing second fiddle to the Fijians. Further, Rabuka was not fully in command of his party. The 23 Fijian seats are contested on provincial lines, and candidates are selected in consultation with provincial councils. In some cases, candidates preferred by the party were overruled by the provincial councils, an example being the replacement of the highly

regarded Education Minister Taufua Vakatale by Jone Kauvesi for the Lomaiviti Fijian seat. Provincial concerns take priority over party interests. These problems of divided loyalties are set to plague Fijian politics as long as elections are fought from within provincial boundaries.

The political fragmentation of Fijian society distressed many Fijians, and Rabuka regarded this as a major cause of his defeat. ‘Gone are the days when Fijians worked in accordance with what was required of them from their elders. Now when an order is given from an elder, they are asked to give the reason and if they are satisfied, then they can act’ (*Daily Post*, 27 March 1999). He was referring to the influence of urbanisation, multiracial education and the challenges and opportunities of a multiethnic society. The use of the provincial boundaries for electing members to parliament accentuated provincial rivalries and sentiments, to the detriment of a centralised party structure. The decline in the number of Indo-Fijians through emigration and a lower birth rate diluted the fear of Indian dominance, which had long unified politics in Fiji. Finally, the absence from the national stage of strong and powerful chiefs—a Ratu Mara or Ratu Penaia or Ratu George and Ratu Edward Cakobau—opened up opportunities for others. It is unlikely that Fijian society will see the likes of these on the national stage in the near future.

## **The race to be prime minister**

As the count proceeded and a change of government appeared likely, most people wondered what Rabuka’s next move might be. The SVT leader conceded defeat with exemplary grace and dignity. His words are worth recalling not only because of their symbolic importance but also as a measure of the man Rabuka had become. The people of Fiji had demonstrated to themselves and ‘to the watching world that we have embraced democracy fully by the way the election was held and by the very nature of the result’. He congratulated the Labour Party, and told his supporters: ‘Take heart that we have fought the good fight. We have given all that we could. Let us now, without rancour and bitterness or any sort of division, congratulate our fellow citizens who have won the day’. Rabuka lamented the apparent block voting by the Indo-Fijian community, but urged the new government to ‘govern us all’. He would

lend support when necessary, promising to be ‘vigilant to ensure a just, accountable and honest government’. He urged the people ‘to move to the centre ground, the middle ground’, to ‘genuinely come together to work for the common good of all our people’. It would be a terrible tragedy to ‘dismantle the progress that we have made together’. Rabuka thanked Reddy for his support. Reddy knew the risks he was taking in coalescing with his party, but as leader with ‘deep conviction and strong principles, he courageously stuck to our agreement and it has cost him and his party dearly’. Not all was lost. ‘I now give my assurances to him and his loyal supporters that their sacrifice and contribution in helping to lay the framework for lasting national unity, stability and progress in our country has not been in vain’.

To the Fijian people, he said,

[w]e must find a way to come together to allow our collective voice to be heard. And to be a force in shaping the future of our country. We have allowed ourselves to splinter into different groups working against our common interest. We know the wise words that a house divided amongst themselves cannot stand. We have a lot of houses, our collective *yavuu* and *vanua* have become divided. And the result is our voice in Government has been diminished (Rabuka, unpublished speech).

Rabuka promised to keep a watchful eye on the government, but before parliament met, he resigned his seat. In a stunning move, Rabuka was then elected chair of the Great Council of Chiefs by polling—the first time in history that chiefs had used secret ballot—32 votes to Tui Vuda Ratu Josefa Iloilo’s 18. Rabuka described his victory as ‘a sign of the chiefly support I have’ (*Daily Post*, June 1999). His name was moved by Adi Litia Cakobau from the leading chiefly family of the Kubuna confederacy and seconded by Ratu Tevita Vakalalabure, the Vunivalu of Natewa.

Labour’s victory put Chaudhry in the driver’s seat. Within hours of the election results becoming known, Chaudhry convened his Labour parliamentary caucus, which elected him as the party’s nominee for prime minister. Soon afterwards, he was appointed prime minister by Ratu Mara. Chaudhry’s other coalition partners were not consulted or informed, and they reacted angrily, claiming that Chaudhry’s appointment was a breach of an implicit agreement to have an ethnic Fijian as prime minister. Adi

Kuini Bavadra Speed, the Fijian Association leader, asked Mara, through Ratu Viliame Dreunimisimisi, to revoke his decision and appoint her as head of government, because she was the leader of the largest 'Fijian' party in the winning coalition. Poseci Bune, the VLV leader, began canvassing the possibility of heading a broad coalition of Fijian parties in opposition. Tora threatened to pull out of the coalition altogether. The Fijian Nationalists proposed to march against the government.

Nothing happened. Chaudhry offered Speed the post of deputy prime minister, which she accepted after Mara asked her to support Chaudhry, and after Labour threatened to invite VLV into cabinet. Speed capitulated, quoting Mara's advice: 'It was basically appealing to us as leaders to consider the importance of cooperation rather [than] be at loggerheads with the new government' (*Fijilive*, 19 May 1999). Speed had been outmanoeuvred. She could sit on the opposition benches with Rabuka, possibly as leader of the opposition, or become deputy prime minister. She chose the latter. Speed also opposed the VLV's inclusion in the cabinet, but was overridden. It was widely believed, but difficult to prove, that Mara wanted Bune and Adi Koila Nailatikau in the cabinet: that might have been the condition of his surprisingly warm public support for Chaudhry. Be that as it may, both were offered and both accepted cabinet posts, as did members of PANU, despite Tora's objections. Later, Chaudhry praised Mara for his critical role in getting the Fijian dissidents to support his government. In truth, Mara did what the constitution obliged him to do: to appoint as prime minister the member of the House of Representative who, in his opinion, commanded majority support. Chaudhry's numbers bolstered his position—he was unassailable; he could govern on his own. But a confluence of interests brought Mara and Chaudhry together. The eastern chiefly establishment had felt ignored by the Rabuka administration; it was now in a position to be represented in cabinet. Mara's waning influence was also reinvigorated. For Chaudhry, the presence of the president's daughter in cabinet, and Mara's public support for his government, shored up Labour's credibility among Fijians who might otherwise have distrusted an Indo-Fijian prime minister. Dislike of Rabuka brought the men together—my enemy's enemy is my friend.

In his first broadcast as prime minister, Chaudhry was at pains to emphasise his government's broad non-racial appeal. He stressed repeatedly that he was prime minister 'not for any[one] community' but 'for everybody'. He pledged his commitment 'to complying with the requirements of the constitution for the equitable participation of all communities in government', promising to 'ensure that all communities fully benefit from the nation's economic development'. He would be 'guided by the wisdom and counsel [of the Great Council of Chiefs] on all matters affecting the interests and welfare of indigenous Fijians and Rotumans'. The business community too had nothing to fear. 'In working to uplift the conditions of life of the poor, the workers, and the less privileged in our society we are not being anti-business. We're just being pro-people'. His government believed in development with justice. 'But we are equally committed to laying down economic policies that will encourage investors and business to grow' (Chaudhry, Address to the Nation, 19 May 1999).

Chaudhry acted astutely in forming his cabinet. Eleven of the seventeen ministers were ethnic Fijians, a gesture of reassurance to the Fijians that their interests were adequately protected. However, he himself controlled the key portfolios of finance, public enterprises, sugar industry and information. His Labour ministers controlled foreign affairs, education, labour and industrial relations, commerce, business development and investment, national planning, local government, housing and environment, justice, regional development and multiethnic affairs and women, culture and social welfare. Chaudhry knew that his success at the next election would depend on his handling of the domestic social and economic agenda. People reacted cautiously and approvingly, though some Fijian nationalists, as well as a few defeated SVT parliamentarians, wanted to oust Labour from power immediately (*Daily Post*, 28 May 1999). Rabuka was approached by people within his own party, including former senior ministers, to lead a 1987-style coup, but he rejected their overtures outright (Personal communication with Rabuka). Things had changed, he said; the majority of the Fijian people had rejected the SVT, and the overwhelming sentiment in the country was to give the new government a chance to prove its mettle. 'Fijians

would not be fooled again’, a searching editorial in a Fijian weekly wrote. It was typical of the reaction throughout the country.

Sakiasi Butadroka and supporters of the Nationalist Vanua Tako Lavo Party are being mischievous and misleading in trying to scare the Fijians into believing the Indians have taken over Fiji... Buta is saying Ratu Mara and Mahendra Chaudhry are selling the rights of the indigenous Fijians. But we all know that no one on their own can sell the rights of the Fijians. No one who is not a Fijian, even if he or she is head of the government, can remove the rights of Fijians to their land and resources. This will only happen if the Fijians themselves agree to it (*Volasiga*, 31–6 June 1999).

The editorial then drew attention to the problems facing the Fijian people, which, it added, had little to do with other groups. ‘When we look at our schools and their academic results, we see it is mainly the Fijians who are failing their exams. That’s because there are weaknesses in our family life and within Fijian society’. The majority of those breaking the laws were Fijians. The biggest victims of sexually transmitted diseases were Fijians. Teenage pregnancies and single mothers were disproportionately Fijians. ‘Who then is Butadroka fooling in Fiji. We are trying to catch up on the difficulties in life we are now facing and to reverse the general opinion that we are lagging behind’. To many Fijians, then, Chaudhry was not an adversary but an ally. It was their own leaders, drunk on power and dulled into complacency, who had deserted them.

Parliament opened on 15 June. In his opening address, the president outlined the government’s policies for its first term. The government’s ‘two crucial and central challenges’ were to ‘further strengthen the bonds of unity in our multiethnic and multicultural society’ and to ‘promote economic growth and social progress’. These challenges, Mara said in a televised speech,

...are to be undertaken with a strong sense of social justice to ensure that development benefits all in our society, including the poor, the disadvantaged and all those who, through no fault of their own, need the helping hand of the state. Government will implement affirmative action and social justice programmes to secure for all citizens and communities equal and equitable access to opportunities, amenities and services to better their lives.

Over the next year or so, the Chaudhry government had its hands full, attempting, albeit not always successfully, to deliver on its large, uncosted

promises or explaining why it could not, at least for the time being.

Chaudhry made a concerted effort to assure the Fijian community that he would not undermine their interests. Soon after the election, he addressed the Bose Levu Vakaturaga, only the second Indo-Fijian leader (after Jai Ram Reddy) to do so, seeking their blessing and expressing his gratitude ‘for their immense contribution in laying the foundation for freedom, democracy, unity and development in our country’ (Ministry of Information Press Release, 8 June 1999). His government agreed to honour a request by the BLV to transfer all state Schedule A and Schedule B to the Native Land Trust Board. The decision was widely praised in the Fijian community. The government also pledged to continue the special annual education fund of F\$4.5 million for Fijian education, and initiated programs to ensure that people on remote islands ‘are not denied the benefits of development’.

But it was not all plain sailing. Chaudhry’s own transition from a trade union leader to a national leader was rocky, leading to confrontation with the media. His cabinet was weak and inexperienced and often spoke with discordant voices. Deputy prime minister Adi Kuini Speed’s ill-judged remarks during her maiden speech, that people should pray for Chaudhry’s conversion to Christianity, embarrassed the government. Adi Kuini’s decision to make Navosa, where she was a high chief, a separate province was rejected by Chaudhry who told her to ‘focus on issues which would bring Fijians together and not disunite them’ (*Fiji Times*, 4 June 1999). Adi Kuini was seen by some as a loose cannon—erratic and autocratic—but she was not the only one in cabinet who harboured personal ambition. Others also saw Chaudhry as a vehicle for their own agendas. The opposition benches, occupied entirely by Fijians and general electors, promised to play rough and hard, adopting expediently extremist positions to sabotage government initiatives, especially in the eyes of the Fijians whose support they needed to recover.

Meanwhile, away from the public gaze, disgruntled groups began to gather to explore ways of ending the life a government that had begun in such optimism.

## Notes

- 1 These words are from the *Pacific Report*, but they are echoed in most reports on the election.
- 2 These were the Fiji Labour Party, National Democratic Party, National Federation Party, the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei, Fijian Association Party, General Voters Party, General Electors Party, Vanua Tako Lavo Party, Vitilevu Dynamic Multiracial Party, Party of National Unity, Veitokani ni Lewenivanua Vakaristo Party, United National Labour Party, Party of Truth, Natural Law Party, Coalition of Independent Nationals Party, Nationalist Vanua Tako Lavo Party, Farmers and General Workers Coalition Party, and Lio On Famor Rotuma Party.
- 3 I owe this description to Robert Norton.
- 4 All the quotations come from the Party's campaign literature.
- 5 When Ratu Mara was confronted with this allegation, he said his 'conscience was clear'.
- 6 Among them was Colonel Inoke Luveni and Manasa Lasaro. They argued that Bune did not meet any of the criteria the party had laid down for leadership. These stipulated that the leader must come from a chiefly family and should be the offspring of a marriage, must not be divorced or separated from his wife and have a stable and happy family, not have 'produced children' outside of marriage, be a Christian and a regular churchgoer, and must believe that Fiji should become a Christian state and that the Sunday Ban be reimposed (see *Daily Post*, 21 April 1999).
- 7 Rabuka offered the first of many apologies at his coalition rally in Lautoka on 26 April 1999. At that meeting, he also said he was 'supposed to be the 'fall guy' but I'd like to tell them that I am the fall guy that refuses to fall'. His implication was that others high in the Fijian hierarchy were involved in the coups.
- 8 Among those who saw the coalition as an error was Sir Vijay Singh (see *Fiji Times*, 18 May 1999).
- 9 Reddy acknowledged this perception in his first post-coup press conference, but he saw this 'partly [as] the result of very successful propaganda', noting that in recent years, his party had extended its base to include as candidates trade unionists, teachers and women.