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Reflections

*Peace, peace is what I seek, and public calm:
Endless extinction of unhappy hates.*
Matthew Arnold

Fiji is a paradox and a pity. A paradox because this island nation endowed with wonderful natural resources, a talented and multiethnic population with a high literacy rate, a once-sophisticated, but now crumbling, public infrastructure where drinkable piped water was once guaranteed, public roads had few potholes, poverty and crime and squatters were visible but contained, hospitals were uncrowded, children went cheerfully to school, and respect for law and order was assured: this nation is tragically prone to self-inflicted wounds with crippling consequences. One coup is bad enough for any country, but three in thirteen years—two in 1987 and one in 2000—staggers the imagination. And a pity because there is no genuine resolution in sight for the country's deep-seated political and economic problems as its leaders dither and the country drifts divided. The battle lines are clearly drawn in a deadly zero-sum game. The militant nationalists, happily unconcerned about the destructive implications of their actions, threaten violent retribution if their agenda for political supremacy is marginalised in mainstream public discourse. Compounding the problem on top of all this is a manifest lack of collective political will to exorcise the country of the demons that terrorise its soul.

The tragedy of modern Fijian politics has been that rosy rhetoric for global consumption has always won over the hard realities on the ground,

blinding its people to the deep-seated problems that beset the country, or at least causing them a sense of slight unease in probing too deeply into the darker recesses of national body politic lest they discover some discomfiting truth about themselves that they would rather ignore (Scarr 1984; Lal 1992; Sutherland 1992). If the emperor had no clothes, it was better not to find out. And so Fiji portrayed itself as a marvellous model of functioning multiracial democracy, largely free of ethnic tension and conflict that plagued many developing countries, the way the world should be, as Pope John Paul II intoned after a fleeting visit to the islands in 1985. Few publicly acknowledged intra and interethnic tensions, and the deep reservations the different communities had about the structure of power relations in the country, and the deeply contested struggle for a definition and clarification of Fijian political identity that preceded independence. The illusion of harmony and amicable understanding in the post-independence era was just that, an illusion, and just as misleading and fraught and dangerous as the impression of balance and equilibrium and harmony conveyed by an earlier metaphor of Fiji as a three-legged stool (Sukuna 1984).

The brutal truth, of course, was that Fiji never had a genuinely shared sense among its citizens about what kind of constitutional arrangement was appropriate for it. It was an issue that had bedevilled the country's politics since the late 1920s. Indigenous Fijian and European leaders, with active official support, argued for separate racial representation. For them, primordial loyalties were paramount. The Indo-Fijians, on the other hand, championed a non-racial common roll, privileging sectarian ideology over ethnicity. The issue dominated political debate throughout the 1960s, leading to boycott of the Legislative Council and tense elections and by-elections (Norton 1990; Lal 1992; Mara 1997). The communal voice won in the end, largely because of Fijian and European opposition but partly also because of the Indo-Fijian leaders' lack of genuine commitment to the idea of common roll, following the death of A.D. Patel. (Lal 1997). Their compromise was enshrined in the secretly negotiated independence constitution, which retained ethnicity as the principal vehicle of political participation while making half-hearted commitment to non-racial politics as a long term national objective (Ali 1977; Lal 1986).

Unsurprisingly, race dominated post-independence politics. The two main political parties, the Alliance and the National Federation, were essentially racially divided, the former among Fijians and general electors and a sprinkling of Indo-Fijians, and the latter predominantly among Indo-Fijians. In time, virtually every issue of public policy came to be viewed through a racial lens: affirmative action, poverty alleviation, allocation of scholarships for tertiary education, opportunities for training and promotion in the public service. The intent to create a more level playing field, to assist the indigenous community to participate more effectively in the public sector, was laudable, but race-based, rather than needs-based, policies inevitably corroded interethnic harmony. Public memory was racially archived even though the plain reality of daily life questioned the salience of race. Citizens were asked (as they still are) for their 'race' when they opened a bank account, took out a driver's licence, left or entered the country. 'Race is a fact of life', Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, Fiji's first and longest serving prime minister, kept reiterating. Under his administration, it almost became a way of life. Political leaders on both sides opportunistically championed moderate multiracialism, but privately—and sometimes not so privately—actually played the race card on every occasion to secure power.

With time, other realities intruded, questioning the legitimacy and value of a political edifice constructed on the foundations of ethnic compartmentalisation. Forces of change, rapid in their pace, were fast eroding old, exhausted assumptions of public discourse. The television and video brought new and strange images into people's homes. Urbanisation proceeded apace, spawning problems that transcended race, and attenuated traditional social and cultural links and attachments. Improved roads speeded up communication, and cash cropping fostered individualistic values. As R.G. Ward put it, 'the combined introduction of new skills, new technology and money have weakened the functional cement which binds native Fijian village society. This does not mean that the structure has collapsed, or will do so in the near future. It does mean that the risk of disintegration exists if other factors shake the edifice' (Ward 1987:124). Decades earlier, O.H.K. Spate, R.F. Watters and C.S. Belshaw, among others, had made essentially similar points, but were dismissed as being insensitive by traditionalists afraid of change,

and ignored by a colonial government too timid or too tied down to orthodoxy to embrace potentially progressive ideas (Spate 1959; Belshaw 1964; Watters 1969). An opportunity was thus missed to enable and empower the Fijians to embrace the forces of modernity engulfing their lives. For this failure, they would pay dearly later.

Things came to a head in 1987, the year of the first two military coups, when a democratically elected, nominally left leaning, Labour-National Federation Party coalition was ousted after a month in office. Some commentators saw the crisis as a straight-out 'racial fight' between the Fijians and Indo-Fijians (Scarr 1988). Others saw the conflict fundamentally as a class struggle between the haves and the have nots, Fijian commoners and Indo-Fijian working class joining hands against the dominance of chiefs and the Indo-Fijian business élite (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988). The importance of both race and class is acknowledged, as it has to be, but the coups were also an effort to turn the clock back, to fortify old structures and values which sustained them against forces of change, to shore up the importance of rural areas as well as the power of traditional leaders at a time when the new government was determined to democratise elements of the traditional order (Lal 1988). As Dr Timoci Bavadra, the deposed Labour prime minister, told his campaign rallies in 1987, the individual's democratic right to vote did not mean a compulsion to vote for a chief. It was a free choice.

By restricting the Fijian people to their communal way of lifestyle in the face of a rapidly developing cash economy, the average Fijian has become more and more backward. This is particularly invidious when the leaders themselves have amassed huge personal wealth by making use of their traditional and political powers' (*Fiji Times*, 17 November, 1987).

These were revolutionary words in the context of the time and the place, a call to action by an indigenous Fijian no less, against a system already feeling itself under siege. They had to be nipped in the bud quickly.

The traditionalists rallied to restore the *status quo*. The post-coup 1990 constitution, decreed by presidential edict, and prepared without widespread consultation, predictably privileged rural Fijians over their urban counterparts, allocating 30 of the 37 Fijian seats to them and only seven to urban and peri-urban areas, even though nearly 40 per cent of Fijians were urban dwellers. Moreover, a candidate had to be registered

in the Vola Ni Kawa Bula (the Register of Native Births) of the constituency in which he or she was standing, further entrenching provincialism in Fijian politics (Lal 1998; Robertson 1998). Provincial and regional affiliations, often opening up pre-colonial social cleavages and questioning the structure of power distribution in Fijian society, acquired an unprecedented public and symbolic significance that tested the colonially created notion of an overarching Fijian cultural and social identity. It also had the seriously deleterious effect of weakening the operation of political parties among Fijians. The provincial councils selected candidates, and their first loyalty therefore was to their provincial power wielders. Leaders of political parties had limited influence over their selection and even less power to discipline them for insubordination or breach of party discipline. The predictable result was an undisciplined proliferation of political parties among Fijians, formed by disgruntled or discarded candidates flying regional flags or conveniently camouflaging their private agendas under the guise of 'Fijian interest'.

To prevent fragmentation, Fijian leaders had the Great Council of Chiefs sponsoring a single political party to unite disparate indigenous opinion and interests under one umbrella (Lal 1998). That party, the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT), was launched in 1990 but the hope for unity was predictably still-born, as many openly questioned the wisdom of a chiefly body getting embroiled in party politics and the highly contestable assumption that Fijians were of one mind on all things political. Would a Fijian opposed to the SVT be any less 'Fijian' than one who supported it? In an ironic twist, a commoner, albeit an uncommon one—Sitiveni Rabuka—was elected president of the party over one of the highest-ranking chiefs of Fiji, Adi Lady Lala Mara. Unsurprisingly, dissension built up, opposition emerged, rival factions developed, and alternative parties were launched, such as the Fijian Association Party, privately supported by Mara, and All National Congress and later the Party of National Unity in western Viti Levu formed by Apisai Tora, the perennial chameleon of Fiji politics. The SVT was dislodged from power in 1999 by a combination of factors, but among the most important was the political fragmentation of the Fijians (Lal 2000). That trend, which shows little sign of abating, will continue to hobble party politics among the Fijians, especially now that provincialism

is back in business and flourishing and Fijian leaders are seeking to institutionalise provincial administration along the Melanesian model. 'We are still coming out of provincialism', Rabuka says, 'and having that form of system will be counter to creating national cohesiveness' (*Sunday Post*, 20 April 2003). He is right, but sadly in a marginalised minority.

The party presently in government, Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua, launched after the 2000 coup on an explicit nationalist platform to woo the supporters of the coup, was able to win power by adopting a fiercely pro-indigenous platform and by outbidding other moderate Fijian parties that failed miserably at the polls. Its effort to consolidate its position included a promise to review the constitution to entrench Fijian political control, and pursue race-based, pro-Fijian, affirmative action policies in commerce, education and the public service (Lal 2002). It also bought off potentially troublesome opposition by diplomatic postings and through other employment opportunities. Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, a key nationalist and coup supporter, is now Fiji's High Commissioner to Papua New Guinea. Isikia Savua, police commissioner at the time of the 2000 coup, and allegedly involved in it, is Fiji's Ambassador to the United Nations, and Adi Samanunu Talakuli, a known Speight supporter from the Kubuna Confederacy, is Fiji's High Commissioner to Malaysia. Berenado Vunibobo, a George Speight sympathiser, has recently handled several diplomatic assignments for the government. Several people publicly known to have supported the coup—Apisai Tora, Ratu Josefa Dimuri, Ratu Inoke Takiveikata, Reverend Tomasi Kanailagi—are in the senate. Ratu Jope Seniloli, the coup leader George Speight's choice for president, is vice president (but now serving time in jail for taking an illegal oath of office). Political patronage has yielded the government much needed short-term benefits, but what will happen when the well runs dry, when there are no more perks to be distributed, or when the purchase price for silence or compliance rises beyond reach? How will the disgruntled elements be pacified then?

The present government has made a review of the constitution a key plank in its political platform. Indeed, while heading the interim administration set up soon after the 2000 coup, Laisenia Qarase established a constitution review committee headed by Professor Asesela

Ravuvu, a known nationalist-leaning former University of the South Pacific academic, to recommend changes (Ravuvu 1992). But the committee, set up without public consultation, criticised from the beginning, and filled with handpicked men of dubious credibility (certainly in the Indo-Fijian community) lacked legitimacy and was unceremoniously disbanded after a few months. A summary of its report—the full report, although taxpayer-funded, has not been released—suggested a hardline nationalist position requiring *vulagis*—guests, foreigners such as Indo-Fijians—to accept the primacy of the *taukei*—the indigenous people, the first settlers—in politics. The fundamental nationalist argument is that Fiji ‘belongs’ to the indigenous Fijians, and its political leadership should therefore always be Fijian. Others can live in Fiji and work and pay taxes but should never aspire to political leadership. That acceptance, the nationalists argue, is an absolute, non-negotiable precondition for political stability.

Although that position is unpalatable to liberal democrats, many indigenous Fijians will, I suspect, broadly embrace it as a symbolic recognition of the indigeneity of the country. There was political stability in Fiji from independence to 1987 because a Fijian, who had the confidence of his people, was at the helm, many Fijians say. When his hold on power was threatened, as in 1977 and again in 1982, retribution was threatened. And when he actually lost power in 1987, violence was sanctioned to reinstate him. In other words, democracy would be viable only with an indigenous Fijian at the helm. Perhaps. But Ratu Mara led the country under a constitution forged through consensus, flawed though it was. Astute and skilful manipulation of the electoral system put the Alliance Party in power, not a constitutional requirement for an indigenous Fijian as head of government. Any constitution that breaches human rights conventions embraced by the international community will be rejected outright. That much is absolutely certain. A constitution that sanctions racial discrimination is doomed from the start—dead before the ink has dried.

There are other issues as well. Fijian society is much more diverse now than ever before. It is criss-crossed with a host of class, regional, provincial and rural–urban interests that contest the claim of unity (Dakuvula 1992). There is no one leader who commands the respect

and loyalty of all Fijians as Ratu Mara once did, or Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna before him. The question is not really about having a Fijian head of government, but rather which Fijian leader would be acceptable to a particular group of Fijians at any given point in time. Dr Timoci Bavadra was a Fijian, and Fijians ousted him in a military coup. Rabuka was a Fijian, and he was defeated by indigenous Fijian votes, first in 1994 and then again in 1999. Ratu Mara was a high chief—paramount chief of the province of Lau—and he was turfed from office after the 2000 coup by a group of Fijians. Commodore Frank Bainimarama is a Fijian, but his leadership of the armed forces was challenged by Fijian members of the military in a bloody mutiny in November 2000. George Speight claims indigenous ancestry—he now prefers to use his Fijian name Ilikini Naitini, though of course a Speight by any other name is still a Speight—and he is languishing in jail for a crime whose beneficiaries are ruling the country.

Fijians of all ranks and backgrounds talk wistfully about the urgent need of forging indigenous political unity, but, as the Reeves Commission argued, that goal is now unattainable, if it ever was. In the past, Fijians lived in villages, for the most part isolated from the other communities and dependent on subsistence agriculture. They had their own ‘native regulations’ and programs of work under the leadership of traditional leaders. But Fijian society has changed dramatically in the years since independence. Now, over 40 per cent live in urban or peri-urban areas, participate in the cash economy, enjoy the benefits of tertiary education, and are well represented in the professions and the public sector (Prasad, Dakuvula and Snell 2001). A sizeable and rapidly growing self-made Fijian middle class is an undeniable social fact in contemporary Fiji. It is therefore unrealistic to expect one political party to accommodate and represent a whole multiplicity of complex and competing interests.

The emphasis on unity also constrains the choices available to Fijian people who will not be able to vote a Fijian government from office if it does not deliver on its promises. Fijians, like other citizens, have the same regard for effectiveness and efficiency. ‘The idea that a Fijian government must be maintained in office at all costs has grave consequences for political accountability’, the commission argued. ‘It requires setting aside the normal democratic control on a government’s

performance in office. This is bad for the Fijian community as well as for the country as a whole' (Reeves, Vakatora and Lal 1996).

But perhaps, as Stewart Firth suggests, Fijian politics increasingly is not about delivering on promises but rather about taking turns at the helm balancing regional, provincial and social interests by virtue of traditional power calculations rather than competence or merit (personal communication 2003). In this equation, non-Fijians matter little. Demographic reality dictates that future direction of Fiji politics will be influenced predominantly by indigenous concerns and calculations. The projected population of Fiji in 2002 was 824,596 of which indigenous Fijians numbered 441,363 (53.5 per cent), while the Indo-Fijians, 328,059, constituted 39.8 per cent. This trend will continue with accelerating Indo-Fijian migration and a lower birth rate in the community. Provincial and regional calculations will, as they already do, determine appointments and promotions and other opportunities in public life. Commodore Bainimarama, from the Kubuna confederacy, was appointed commander of the Fiji Military Forces in part, people say, because the two previous holders of the position, Sitiveni Rabuka and Ratu Epeli Ganilau, were from Tovata. Rabuka complained how, under the 1990 constitution, under which Fijian members were elected to parliament from the provinces, he had to ensure the presence of all the provinces in the cabinet, irrespective of ability and talent. Not to do so would have been interpreted as a slight on the province's name and incur their wrath. But as Fijian numbers increase, the Fijian people will realise that good governance and not the calculations of provincial representation will serve their interests better. Many Fijians privately do, but are fearful of expressing dissent when the strident talk of 'Fijian interests' fills the air.

Leadership is a problem for both the Fijian as well as Indo-Fijian communities. Among Fijians, the era of the dominance of paramount chiefs with overarching influence across the whole spectrum of indigenous Fijian society, tutored for national leadership by the British in the post-war years, has ended. The paramounts are gone: Ratu George Cakobau, Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu Penaia Ganilau and Ratu Mara are all dead. These Fijian leaders brought with them practical experience of public service—Mara was a district officer in the predominantly Indo-Fijian sugar district of Ba—and had a broad educational background in

Fiji and overseas (Mara 1997). Whatever else may be said of them and their politics, they generally believed in the principles of good, accountable governance, no doubt a legacy of their experience in the colonial civil service. They also had a multiracial circle of friends, and were committed to the principles of democracy, even if it was on their own terms.

Their successors lack their broad experience and background. Many latter-day Fijian leaders went from racially exclusive provincial primary schools to predominantly Fijian secondary schools, such as Queen Victoria or Ratu Kadavulevu, their formative years uninformed and uninfluenced by any meaningful exposure to the cultures of other communities (Dean and Ritova 1988; Sharpham 2000). They are thus culturally ill-equipped to meet the leadership challenges of building a multiracial nation, embroiled as they often are in provincial and regional politics to carve out an inclusive, more embracing national personality for themselves. In civil administration, too, senior military leaders who were facing dead-end careers but were politically well connected, were plucked from the armed forces to become district commissioners, serving in areas and among people whose culture and way of life they did not understand, unlike their colonial counterparts who were expected to have some fluency in the dominant language of the area (Hindustani or Fijian as the case might have been). That trend is likely to continue in a public culture dominated by the politics of racial patronage.

Indo-Fijians have leadership problems of their own. Over the years, there has been a marked shift in the social and educational background of Indo-Fijian leaders. At the time of independence—and before—the majority of Indo-Fijian politicians were lawyers or businessmen or landlords. Now, the base has diversified, with increasing numbers coming from the trade unions and the academia and from the ranks of retired schoolteachers and civil servants looking for second careers. They, too, for the most part, are handicapped by cultural limitations similar to those of the Fijians. Few politicians, for instance, are fluent in the indigenous language, more specifically Bauan, although those from rural areas with substantial Fijian populations such as Bua, Savu Savu, Taveuni, Levuka and Nadroga do speak the local dialects. And not many of them have a direct experience of Fijian culture. Those who do are few and are not

always appreciated. When a Labour parliamentarian made his maiden speech in his Nadroga dialect, there were disapproving voices among his own colleagues. The minister of multiethnic affairs, George Shiu Raj, was a fluent Fijian speaker, at ease in both cultures, but his cross-cultural skill was sadly derided. The message seems to be that you cannot be an 'authentic' Fijian or Indo-Fijian if you are cross-culturally fluent or transgress ethnic and cultural boundaries. Such is the nature of public discourse in a racially segregated society.

The trade union culture, at least the way it has evolved in Fiji, muddies the already troubled currents of national politics. That was one of Mahendra Chaudhry's most severe handicaps as prime minister. Few disagreed with his prognosis of the problems facing Fiji, but they disliked the manner in which he articulated them: forthright, testy, even confrontational, with little appreciation that the Fijian mode of both private and public discourse is allusive and tempered by protocol. In trade union politics everywhere, ends often justify the means, but in national politics, the means, articulated in the glare of intense, unrelenting public scrutiny, is probably just as, if not more, important as the end. Chaudhry often chanted the mantra of electoral mandate to justify his uncompromising pursuit of his election promises. To be sure, he had the mandate from the voters, but that, he discovered to his enormous cost, was only one mandate among many. The Great Council of Chiefs had its mandate for the indigenous community; the Native Land Trust Board had its mandate, the Fijian dominated army its own. The art of political leadership in such a situation lay in negotiating one mandate among many competing and often incompatible mandates. Chaudhry's tragedy was that he ignored this crucial fact or at least showed an insufficient appreciation of it. This did not cause his downfall, but it made its contribution.

Multiethnic societies, with divergent traditions of discourse, are prone to miscommunication and misunderstanding among its people and leaders. Fiji is no exception. Indo-Fijian politicians revel in open, robust public debate often conducted without subtlety or irony. Their sledgehammer approach is direct and confrontational, and applauded by their supporters drunk on the rhetoric of polarised politics. The Fijian tradition of public discourse, on other hand, is generally the opposite: allusive, indirect and

hedged-in by cultural protocol and sensitive to person and place. In that context, sometimes what is not said is probably just as important as what is. The gap is accentuated by the colonial legacy of racial compartmentalisation, the absence of shared cultural traditions and language (except English), attachment to different faiths and, more recently, the corrosive effects of the coups. Leaders talk at each other rather than to each other, and even then often through the media. Of course, Fiji is not alone in this, but its peculiar history compounds the problem.

Misunderstandings are not only linguistic but cultural as well. Let me illustrate. Most Indo-Fijians routinely assert that Fijians have over 80 per cent of all the land in Fiji. That is statistically true, but only a small percentage of it is economically useful. Moreover, land is not owned by one monolithic entity but by thousands of social units scattered throughout the islands. Thus, some Fijians have ample land, while others are effectively landless. But these internal facts of uneven patterns of native landownership and land distribution escape Indo-Fijian comprehension beyond the most generalised understanding of their complexity. There is something more.

To most non-Fijians, land is an item of economic utility, a basis for an income, to be acquired, used and disposed of, if the occasion arises, without much emotional wrench. To most Fijians, on the other hand, and almost every rural Fijian, it is part of his being, his soul; it was his forebears' and shall be his progeny's till time immemorial. And the Indian sees large stretches of land between Suva and Sigatoka and Nausori and Rakiraki lying idle and can't understand it. He even becomes angry and bitter when he sees his former flourishing farm is now, after he was denied renewal of his lease, bush and scrub. The Fijian does not see it that way. Sufficient for him that it is there (Singh 1988:2, see also Overton 1988 and Kamikamica 1997).

Singh's characterisation of the problem may have an element of deliberate exaggeration to underscore the difference in perception of the two communities, but the larger truth holds about two essentially competing and often incompatible notions of land as commodity and land as cultural inheritance.

But just as Indo-Fijians do not grasp the Fijians' almost mystical attachment to their *vanua* (Ravuvu 1985), indigenous Fijians have little understanding of the deeper cultural and moral impulses that inform the Indo-Fijian mind-set. The two most crucial concepts in Indo-Fijian thought are *iz̄z̄at* (honour) and *insaf* (justice) (Gillion 1977; Lal 2000).

‘Do what is right, not what is opportunistic’, the *Bhagvada Gita* teaches. Islam sanctions *jihad* in the face of oppression. Death is preferable to dishonour. ‘A no muttered from the deepest convictions is better and greater’, A.D. Patel told his rallies in the 1960s, quoting Mahatma Gandhi, ‘than a yes muttered merely to please, or worse, to avoid trouble’, because in the end, truth will triumph (*Satyame Vijayte*). I believe that Indo-Fijians would accept an outcome, even if it is politically disadvantageous to them, provided it is transparently fair and does not affront their sense of dignity, honour and self-respect. Indo-Fijian leaders pushed for a common roll of voting in the 1920s when they were a minority in the population. As H.L.S. Polak told the Colonial Office in 1929, ‘everywhere they [Indians] stand by the principle of the common franchise as symbol of equal citizenship’ (Gillion 1977:138). In the 1960s, the overwhelming majority rallied to that cause because the cause was just, not necessarily because it was politically advantageous or indeed achievable. Privately, many Indo-Fijians would probably accept a Fijian head of government if that outcome were achieved through political negotiation, but never as a constitutional right. In 1997, for example, Indo-Fijians put aside their longstanding demand for political parity with the Fijians and accepted proportionality in the reserved seats (23 Fijian and 19 Indo-Fijian) because the allocation was based on the demographic size of the two groups. It is difficult to convey how deeply offensive the words ‘second class citizenship’ are to the Indo-Fijians’ sense of honour and self-worth.

Many Fijians feel that the Great Council of Chiefs should play a more active role in national politics (Madraiwiwi 2002). Since its formal establishment after Cession in 1874, it has been the principal advisor to colonial and post-colonial governments on matters relating to the indigenous community. In the 1970 independence constitution, its nominees in the senate enjoyed the power of veto over all legislation touching indigenous Fijian interests and concerns. The 1997 constitution, for the first time, recognises the Great Council of Chiefs as a constitutionally established institution (as opposed to one established by an Act of Parliament). Its 14 nominees in an upper house of 34 members enjoy veto powers similar to the provisions of the 1970 constitution. The General Council of Chiefs also nominates the president

and the vice president of Fiji. In short, its role and authority are an important political as well as constitutional fact and, perhaps more important, beyond dispute or debate.

The council's supporters see it as an important force for good in restraining ethnic chauvinism, in facilitating ethnic accommodation, and bridging the ethnic divide (Norton 1999). Perhaps, though, the actual evidence is contestable. In 1987, the General Council of Chiefs convened to legitimise the overthrow of the Labour Coalition government, its proceedings dominated by its more hardline, violence-threatening elements. Rabuka was hailed as a cultural hero and inducted into the council as a life-member. In 2000, it similarly convened, at the behest of Speight supporters, to demand changes to the 1997 constitution—the very constitution it had unreservedly blessed—to accommodate the nationalist Fijian demand. Such inconsistency or blatant opportunism undermines the council's moral authority and legitimacy among non-Fijians. The current chair of the General Council of Chiefs, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, says he is a 'keen to involve Indian leaders in the chiefs' council to discuss sensitive issues such as land' (*Fiji Times*, 14 April 2003). That is a welcome gesture in the right direction, but it would require a consistent effort to ensure that the Indo-Fijians are able to make genuine representation of their concerns, interests and aspirations. There are, however, some Fijian chiefs such as Adi Litia Cakobau who have argued that the chiefly council should represent the concerns of the indigenous community exclusively, and that anything else would detract from its central purpose and mission.

Unfortunately, there are few avenues available for interethnic dialogue outside the political arena where talk is inevitably shrill and antennas are tuned to ethnic partisanship and sectional advantage. Religious organisations have few opportunities for regular interfaith conversation. The Methodist Church, to which the majority of Fijians belong, has been strongly nationalistic since the 1987 coups, except briefly when it was led by Dr Iliata Tuwere. In 2003, the Church was pleading for the pardon of the soldiers involved in the 2000 mutiny as a part of the reconciliation process. In the mid 1990s, the various faiths—Hindu, Muslim, Christian—were able to overcome their differences to establish an 'interfaith search' to seek common ground to pave the way for national

healing and reconciliation, but corrosive effects of ethnic and religious politics have eroded its foundations (Hurley 2000). Fijians have their traditional avenues for intra-Fijian dialogue and dispute resolution through district and provincial councils, and through the machinery of the Fijian administration. But these are closed to the Indo-Fijians. The Girit Council, an organisation of various Indo-Fijian social and cultural organisations formed in 1979 to mark the centenary of Indian arrival in Fiji, is virtually defunct, while the Indian Summit, convened in the aftermath of the 2000 coup, has vanished without a trace. Indo-Fijians have their village committees and voluntary social and cultural associations, but these are ill-equipped to facilitate cross-cultural, interethnic dialogue. What is urgently required is a proper and properly equipped forum for an exchange of views between the two communities outside the political arena (Vakatale 2000).

Perhaps in this context, a recommendation of the Reeves Commission is worth revisiting. A number of Indo-Fijian organisations and community leaders asked the Commission to recommend the creation of a representative Indo-Fijian umbrella body similar to the Great Council of Chiefs. The commission reported

[w]e endorse the principle behind the suggestion, but think that, initially, it should be taken up informally by the Indo-Fijian community. If there is agreement about the basis for the selection of the members of such a body, and it is able to meet and work in a way that demonstrates broad support for its composition and role, consideration should then be given to providing it with a statutory constitutional base (Reeves Commission 1996:263).

But the Fiji Labour Party has already rejected the idea. An Indian Council, it says, would ‘only serve to further divide the people [and] compartmentalise through the creation of racial institutions’ (*Daily Post*, 24 April, 2003). That is true, just as it is true that a properly functioning council could also conceivably challenge the party’s power base in the Indo-Fijian community. Be that as it may, the prospects look bleak.

The one bright light in an otherwise dim scene is the work of various multiethnic, non-government organisations. Fiji Women’s Rights Movement and the Women’s Crisis Centre have done much to educate the public about issues of gender and domestic violence, even though both are urban-based. The Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education

and Advocacy has sponsored important research on sensitive issues of social justice (Ratuva 2002). The Fiji branch of Moral Re-armament has played its part in trying to build cross-cultural bridges. But perhaps the most important, certainly the most controversial, has been the multiracial Citizens Constitutional Forum. Formed in the mid 1990s, it has convened numerous meetings and sponsored conferences, workshops and publications to educate the public about their constitutional and human rights (Cottrell 2000; Griffin 2002). It successfully challenged the legality of the Qarase government's unwillingness to form a multiparty government with the Labour party as provided for in the constitution. The Citizens Constitutional Forum has consistently been a sharp critic of the government's race-based affirmative action policies. Stung by Citizens Constitutional Forum's criticism, the government deregistered it, but the organisation's spirit remains undaunted, and it continues its battle for a non-racial, democratic Fiji. I believe that organisations like these, which seek non-violent resolution to the country's deep-seated problems through non-racial means, have much to contribute to the difficult task of nation building.

Recent crises have severely tested the fabric of race relations in Fiji. On the surface things look calm. People play and work together, mingle in the markets, and children attend mixed schools, but the underlying tone is one of apprehension and anxiety. The government's affirmative action for indigenous Fijians, approved in some form or other by many Fijians, is resented by most Indo-Fijians because they are not transparent and based on assumptions that defy the experience of daily life: large sections of the Indo-Fijians live in desperate poverty. They look in dread at the glass ceiling in the public sector. Sugarcane growers, for the most part uneducated and unskilled, are forced to relocate and start all over again as leases expire and their formerly productive fields revert to bush, generations of effort vanishing at the stroke of the pen or an official edict. The talk of reviewing the constitution to further entrench Fijian control causes them deep anxiety. I asked a prominent Indo-Fijian lawyer married to an indigenous Fijian what the future held for the Indo-Fijians. Her response: 'There is little future for them here unless the present government changes its policies'. That looks unlikely in the short term. Unwanted and uprooted, Indo-Fijians leave. Since 1987, over 80,000 have left, and more would leave if they

could, draining the country of skills and resources Fiji can ill-afford to lose (Bedford 1989; Gani 2000; Mohanty 2002). But now, more and more indigenous Fijians are leaving as well, to give themselves and their children a better future. The Indo-Fijians are caught in a bind. They are leaving because they don't see in Fiji a future for themselves and especially their children, and the government is reluctant to spend money on training and educating a group it knows will one day go. A tragic catch-22 situation, if ever there was one.

To heal the wounds, the government has set up a Department of National Reconciliation and Unity to promote racial harmony and cohesion through social, cultural, educational and sporting activities. But interethnic reconciliation is only one part of the government's effort. An important role for the department is to 'promote greater unity within the indigenous Fijian community through various programs and activities at village, tikina, provincial and national levels'. Political self-interest and survival instincts drive the reconciliation effort; the government knows that its chances of electoral success depend crucially on Fijian unity, however elusive that prospect might be. It is precisely for that reason that, however much it may wish it, and I know that members of the government at the highest level want justice done, the government cannot afford to be seen to be proactive in pursuing the perpetrators of injustice. It is for that reason that the government reportedly asked the military to be lenient on those convicted of mutiny. It is for that reason that coup supporters have been dealt with lightly, and why the government is loathe to reprimand ministers who utter racist remarks under the cover of 'parliamentary privilege'. The government recognises that having aroused Fijian expectations with ambitious but costly promises it cannot now retreat. To appear to be making compromises in the national interest would be seen as a sign of defeat. In short, the government is riding a tiger it cannot dismount at will.

True and enduring reconciliation, which all the people of Fiji want, will come only when the truth of the past is confronted honestly and dispassionately. In 1987, opportunistic leaders looked the other way when the coup took place. Sitiveni Rabuka was hailed as a cultural hero of the Fijian people—'Steve: The Hand of God' the t-shirts proclaimed. What interests and concerns supported the overthrow of the Labour Coalition

government were never investigated. Fiji is again reluctant to look too deeply into the heart of its problems. Thirteen years later, Fiji experienced another, and more, violent overthrow of a democratically elected government. And if the causes of the present crisis are not investigated, Fiji will, as surely as night follows day, encounter more violent turbulence on its ill-fated journey into the future. The politicisation of the military, the police force and the public service will have to cease. The culture of corruption and nepotism nourished after 1987 will have to be confronted, the political ambitions of the 'Children of 1987' to take the front seat as a matter of ethnic right curtailed. Regard for law and order would have to be reintroduced to groups of people, often young, unskilled, marginalised in the march to modernisation and vulnerable to emotional exploitation by would-be politicians. Only then will a solid base for economic development and investment be built.

Beyond that, the people of Fiji would have to reexamine the foundations of a political culture they have inherited. It is my firm view that a very large part of Fiji's problems derives from having a political system based on race (see also Naidu 2000). An obsession with race encourages ethnic chauvinism, poisons multiethnic discourse, and hinders the search for solutions to Fiji's deep-seated social and economic problems, which have little to do with race but everything to do with colour-blind forces of globalisation. I am not saying that ethnic sentiments are not authentic or deeply felt, or that it is a 'false consciousness' that will disappear with 'modernisation'. Ethnicity has its proper place in public discourse. But I do have a problem with a discourse that sees an individual as nothing more than the sum total of his or her ethnicity, to the exclusion of every other formative influence. I do have a problem when the central pillars of state institutions are constructed solely on the edifice of ethnic exclusivity. To put it another way, if 'race is a fact of life' in Fiji, it is but one of the many facts of life. Gender inequality, poverty and social deprivation, mismanagement and corruption, the abuse of public trust, the impinging forces of globalisation, are others.

The inescapable truth is that using race as a scapegoat will lead Fiji nowhere. Indo-Fijians do not threaten the foundations of Fijian culture and traditional society: modernity does.

Asesela Ravuvu

The new political system emphasises equal opportunity and individual rights, which diminish the status and authority of chiefs. Equal opportunities in education and equal treatment under the law have further diminished the privileges which chiefs enjoyed under colonial rule and traditional life before ... Although village chiefs are still the focus of many ceremonial functions and communal village activities, their roles and positions are increasingly of a ritualistic nature' (Ravuvu 1988:171).

Sitiveni Rabuka

I believe that the dominance of customary chiefs in government is coming to an end and that the role of merit chiefs will eventually overcome those of traditional chiefs: the replacement of traditional aristocracy with meritocracy' (*Fiji Times*, 29 August 1991).

And so it goes. One can turn the hands of the clock back, but it won't do the clock any good, as the distinguished humanist Oscar Spate used to say. To reclaim the potential that is surely hers, Fiji will have to reject the old, exhausted orthodoxies of the past, old ways of thinking and doing things. There is no alternative coexistence. A past unexorcised of its demons will continue to haunt the country's future.