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## Postscript

Fiji went to the polls in mid May 2006, the tenth time since independence in 1970. In what was widely expected to be a contest marred by internal political fragmentation among indigenous Fijians and a surge of independents—18 political parties were registered on the eve of the elections and an unprecedented 68 independents contested—the elections delivered a result that defied most predictions. The ruling Soqosoqo Duavata Lewenivanua (SDL) party won 36 seats of the 71 seats in the House of Representatives, a clear win over rival Fijian parties. The Fiji Labour Party won 31 seats, its appeal far outweighing that of its long time rival the National Federation Party. The United Peoples Party and independents each winning two of the remaining four seats, the latter joining the government to boost its numbers. Of the total 479, 674 registered voters 256,014 (53.4 per cent) were Fijians, 204, 470 (42.6) were Indo-Fijians, 5,373 (1.1 per cent) were Rotumans, and 13,817 (2.9 per cent) were Generals (that is, all those not included in any of the other categories).<sup>1</sup>

The voter turnout, despite early fears to the contrary, was high: 87.7 per cent compared to 81 per cent in 2001. The turnout was uniformly higher among all ethnic groups: 90 per cent in Fijian provincial constituencies in 2006 compared to 82 per cent in 2001, 89 per cent among Indo-Fijians compared to 81 per cent in 2001, an increase of 10 per cent among Generals 73 per cent to 84 per cent and from 76.4 per cent to 88 per cent among Rotumans. Of the total votes cast, 8.8 per cent were declared invalid; this is a high figure but lower than that of

2001, 12.5 per cent. Finally, the pattern of racial polarisation at the polls was evident in this election as in others in the past. The SDL received 80 per cent of all the ethnic Fijian votes and only one per cent of Indo-Fijian votes, while Labour won 83 per cent of Indo-Fijian votes and 6 per cent of indigenous Fijian votes. In the May 2006 election, the SDL's considerable appeal to Fijian voters was evident—whereas, in 2001 it had got only 51 per cent of indigenous votes. On the Indo-Fijian side, there was a similar story. The majority of Indo-Fijians rallied behind Labour, seeing it as the only political party capable of matching the Fijian-dominated SDL and adequately representing Indo-Fijian concerns and interests. Labour's rival for Indo-Fijian votes, the NFP, got only 13 per cent of the Indo-Fijian communal votes.

More significant than the low-key election was what followed soon afterwards. Before all the results were officially declared, SDL leader, Laisenia Qarase, claimed victory and proceeded immediately to the Government House to be sworn in as the next prime minister. He then invited Labour to join his multiparty cabinet as mandated by the constitution. He had done this in 2001 as well, but at that time had offered Labour insignificant ministries, a proposal that Labour had rightly rejected as 'insulting'. This time, Qarase observed both the letter as well as the spirit of the power-sharing provision of the constitution and offered Labour substantial portfolios, including Labour and Industrial Relations, Commerce and Trade, Health, Employment Opportunity, Local Government and Urban Development, Agriculture, and Energy and Minerals.

The offer caught everyone by surprise. During the campaign, Qarase had said that he 'detested' the idea of a multiparty cabinet: multiethnic cabinet yes, multiparty cabinet no. It would not work, he said, because the manifestos of the two major parties were poles apart, and he would not deviate from his own manifesto in any multiparty cabinet. His personal hostility towards Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhry was palpable. But he changed his mind after claiming victory, saying that the multiparty cabinet idea was God's plan for Fiji and he was wholly and enthusiastically committed to it. 'The undertaking I am giving to the country,' he said, 'is that the cabinet will not fail through anything I do or anything I say'. The multiparty idea was a 'possible master key to a door that had always remained closed' (*Fiji Sun*, 19 July 2006).

Qarase's offer put Labour in a quandary. At first, Chaudhry balked, saying that while the portfolios offered were substantial, they were all 'in a mess', and they would place an extra burden on Labour ministers while the SDL would oversee the most lucrative ministries. But public opinion, both Fijian and Indo-Fijian, solidly supported the concept of multiparty cabinet, leaving Labour no choice but to participate. Soon afterwards, however, the senior leaders of the party were divided over the manner in which the multiparty concept should work. Chaudhry insisted that Labour ministers in cabinet should strictly pursue the interests and priorities of the Labour Party while others, especially senior party members and ministers, including Krishna Datt and Deputy Leader Poseci Bune, advocated a more inclusive, non-partisan and less confrontational approach to making the concept work. At this writing, Labour is grappling with its deepening internal tensions and challenges.

Of the 18 parties that contested the elections, only a handful had any hope of success. The main contenders were the SDL, Party of National Unity (PANU) and the National Alliance on the Fijian side and the FLP and National Federation Party on the Indo-Fijian side.

As the party in government, the SDL had the obvious advantage of incumbency. In the previous five years in office, it had dipped into the public purse to keep its ethnic constituency intact. A classic example was the F\$16 million scam in the Agriculture ministry. The Auditor General regularly reported on the misuse of public office and public funds but to little avail. The government also sought to implement its 20-year development plan to ensure effective Fijian and Rotuman participation in 'all areas of our economic development'. To that end, in its 2005 budget it allocated F\$4 million for the Fiji Development Bank Interest Subsidy Scheme for Fijians, F\$1 million capital grant to the Native Land Trust Board and F\$8 million for Fijian Affairs Board scholarship (*Sunday Post*, 9 January 2005).

The Qarase government took a number of steps to keep its fractious nationalist junior partner in government, the Christian Matanitu Vanua Alliance (CAMV), on side. It used the Compulsory Supervision Order to secure the early release of its members who were gaoled for their role in the 2000 coup. Among those released in this manner were Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, a paramount chief of Cakaudrove (Tui Cakau),

(currently Minister of Fijian Affairs and Provincial Development) and Ratu Josefa Dimuri (presently a Minister of State for Agriculture—Alternative Livelihood). The controversy caused by this ‘abuse’ of the system was ignored by the government. The move was popular where it mattered most: the politically important Fijian heartland.

Perhaps the most controversial initiative that the government mooted was the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill, designed, its critics argued, not so much to heal the wounds caused by the 2000 coup and related subsequent events, but to tamper with the judicial system to gain the early release and pardon of the gaoled coup perpetrators and accomplices. The government denied the allegation, but the overwhelming sense in the country was that this was indeed the government’s intention. The Bill provoked sustained protest across the community, who wanted to the judicial process to take its course. As an editorial in the *Fiji Sun* put it, ‘[t]he implementation of such a Bill is going to create a wrong impression among the people that it is okay to execute a coup or go against the security force. This is because they will bank on such a Bill to protect them’ (*Fiji Sun*, 4 January 2006). Although publicly the government stood by the Bill, privately it agreed to take a more moderate stance, agreeing, for instance, to table it after the election. But the desired political result had been achieved: the perpetrators of the coup were assured that although the government’s moves had been thwarted, those in power were looking after their interests.

The government’s support of the Bill brought it into direct and open opposition to the military. The relations between the two had soured soon after the 2001 elections. Some in the ruling party wanted commodore Frank Bainimarama and others to be prosecuted for removing Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara from Government House at the height of the 2000 crisis and for attempting to abrogate the constitution (*Fiji Sun*, 18 December 2004). Bainimarama made no secret of his desire to have the Home Minister Josefa Vosanibola and his Chief Executive Officer Lesi Korovalavala removed; actions that the government was loath to do (*Fiji Sun*, 27 December 2005). On several occasions, Bainimarama publicly criticised the government’s policies, including those which were racially lopsided in favour of Fijians. ‘This government continuously brings in racist policies and programs to justify its existence to the

indigenous community', Bainimarama said, adding, '[t]he military is willing to return and complete for this nation the responsibilities we gave this government in 2000 and 2001' (*Fiji Sun*, 9 January 2006). Qarase called the army's 'continual interference' 'undemocratic and unwarranted' saying the 'Commander's stated intention of involving the military in the national election campaign is a threat to peace and stability, and the conduct of free and fair elections' (*Fiji Times*, 15 March 2006). But that was as far as the prime minister was prepared to go, ignoring those who called for the commander to be reined in. The country shuddered at the prospect of another upheaval caused by military intervention

Nor would Bainimarama allow the government to nominate Ratu Jope Seniloli, former Vice President, who was gaoled for taking a wrongful oath of office but released before serving out his term, to his old office (*Fiji Sun*, 20 February 2006). The army announced that the Unity Bill would 'never' be allowed to pass in parliament. 'The RTU Bill is not going to happen', Bainimarama thundered ominously (*Fiji Sun*, 22 December 2005). On the eve of the election, Bainimarama openly urged voters not to vote for the SDL and sent teams of army officers throughout the country to 'educate' rural Fijians about the government's 'misguided' policies. The day that parliament was dissolved in March, 500 soldiers armed with automatic weapons and wearing camouflage held a parade through Suva to 'show the people of Fiji that we are here to provide security' (*Fiji Sun*, 28 March 2006) The senior officers in the army backed their commander, although there was one (unsuccessful) challenge to Bainimarama's leadership from within the ranks, led by Jone Baledrokadroka in January 2006.

The army's active intervention in the campaign caused great anxiety. Labour President Jokapeci Koroi endorsed, on television, the view that her party would welcome moves by the army to remove the SDL from power, a strange proposition from a political party which itself had been the victim intervention by the army in 1987. The army's defiant public stance against the government encouraged many voters in the Indo-Fijian community to come out and cast their votes. 'The army is with us', Labour told its rallies. 'Vote without fear. There will not be another coup'.

The government argued that the army was overstepping its boundaries, meddling in affairs that were none of its concern. It wanted the military

to observe the well-established Westminster convention of civilian control of the armed forces; the army's role was to enforce the peoples' will, not pre-empt or freely interpret it. For its part, the military saw its role as being in charge of the 'security' of the nation, very broadly defined. One senior officer told me that instead of the army having to 'clean up the mess after the fact', as it had to do in the past, it was better to prevent it in the first place. Pakistan was cited as a model.

Post-election, especially with the multiparty cabinet in place, the army's public profile has been lowered and there signs of reconciliation between it and the government. How long this lasts remains to be seen. If the government moves to implement the recommendations of a White Paper calling for a reduction in the size of the army or seeks to bring the military under proper civilian control once again, relations between the two could sour.

On the eve of the election, the fear of the fragmentation of Fijian votes appeared to be well founded and SDL's prospects looked to be threatened. The unknown factor was the impact that the independents, many of whom had unsuccessfully sought tickets from the party, might have in closely contested constituencies. Perhaps the most visible challenge to the SDL was the New Alliance Party, which espoused a radically different vision for a multiracial Fiji. The New Alliance Party was headed by Ratu Epeli Ganilau, former army commander, president of the Great Council of Chiefs, son of a former president, and a high chief in his own right. Launched on the eve of the election, the party promised to remove all vestiges of racial discrimination from public policy and criticised the government for pandering to the whims of the Fijian nationalist fringe. It tried to reclaim the middle ground by advertising itself as the legitimate successor to the former Alliance Party whose leaders included Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, Ratu Sir Edward Cakobau and Ratu Sir George Cakobau—scions of the Fijian establishment. The party attracted favourable media attention, but failed to win a seat. Its politics of moderation was decidedly at odds with the ascendant politics of racial polarisation that the SDL practised to great effect.

The fear of fragmentation led some senior Fijian figures, including former Reeves Commissioner Tomasi Vakatora and hotelier Radike Qereqeretabua, to form a Fijian 'Grand Coalition' in August 2005 (formally launched on 15 February 2006) to encourage Fijian parties to

share preferences among themselves. Vakatora argued that Fijian political unity was the prerequisite to political stability in Fiji. ‘When Fijians get rattled, they rattle the country’, he said. He was criticised by many, including by the National Alliance Party, because his views went against the thrust of the Reeves Commission, which recommended the formation of multiethnic alliances. Vakatora’s assessment was based on a shrewd and realistic assessment of the realities on the ground as they were, not as they out to be. Even the Vice President, the widely respected Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, said that ‘[m]ost indigenous Fijians believe that their interests can only be protected by Fijian political control’, adding that ‘[n]either the constitution nor the rule of law is sufficient for their purposes because they can be impugned by whoever is in power’ (*Fiji Sun*, 16 February 2006). Vakatora was essentially saying the same thing.

The idea of a Grand Coalition failed to materialise. The National Alliance rejected the idea, PANU was loosely associated with the Labour Party, the nationalist Vanua Tako Lavo Party fizzled out and the Soqosoqo Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT), in power for much of the 1990s as the party sponsored by the Great Council of Chiefs, was a shadow of its former self, fielding, in the strangest of ironies, only one candidate—an Indo-Fijian. The failure of the minor Fijian parties was not an accident; it was in large part orchestrated by the SDL, which campaigned as the main Fijian party and as the defender of Fijian interests. Its pro-Fijian policies were championed. Qarase stated repeatedly that Fiji was not ready for a non-Fijian prime minister, a sentiment with which many Fijians across the political spectrum agreed. The Fijian people are ‘the majority community in Fiji numerically, and they are also the majority landowning community in the country’, Qarase argued in justification (*Fiji Times*, 4 May 2006). Qarase’s trump card was Mahendra Chaudhry. Sensing a deep distrust of the Labour leader among many Fijians, Qarase told his audiences to ‘vote for me and my party if you don’t want Chaudhry as prime minister’. Tupeni Baba, Chaudhry’s former deputy prime minister and now a SDL candidate, said, ‘[a] vote for Chaudhry is a return to 2000’, adding ‘all of us Fijians in the Labour Party from the beginning had left him as we cannot see [that] Chaudhry will protect the Fijian interests’ (*Sunday Sun*, 23 April 2006) The tactic worked. In the last days of the campaign, SDL came across strongly as a party of and for the Fijians.

Just as Fijians rallied behind SDL, so the overwhelming majority of Indo-Fijians supported Labour. A part of the reason for Labour's popularity was the weakness of other Indo-Fijian parties, especially the NFP. Its voice of moderation, calling for dialogue and consensus, fell on soil tilled for racial polarisation. The party seemed to make some inroads in the cane belts, a Labour stronghold, in the early part of the campaign, but Labour's final campaign, stating that a vote for minor political parties was a vote wasted, and that the main players in the political arena were itself and SDL, appealed to many voters. The NFP was underfunded and unable to compete effectively with its much better organised rival. The fact that the party did not have a clearly identifiable leader, but a triumvirate consisting of Attar Singh, Raman Singh and Pramod Rae, did not help matters. Labour, on the other hand, had in Mahendra Chaudhry a leader with a track record and a household name. Its list of candidates consisted of people who had strong connections with the grassroots. Its effective television advertisements focused on issues of every day concern to ordinary people: collapsing infrastructure, bad water supply, pot holes on main roads, burgeoning squatter settlements, inadequate housing, rising poverty levels, increasing unemployment. The NFP also raised these issues, but in the media war, it could not match Labour.

With Labour and SDL emerging as the two main contestants, the campaign turned to just a handful of issues. There was no room for nuance and subtlety, no opportunity to discuss the fundamental problems facing Fiji. And there were many. One obvious issue was the fate of the country's sugar industry, hobbled by non-renewal of leases, the impending end to the preferential access to the European Union and the perennial breakdown of ancient equipment at the main mills. The government mooted a plan to restructure the sugar industry, with the assistance and advice of a technical team from India, but the topic was never seriously raised in the campaign. Equally ignored was the question of non-renewal of leases. Labour wanted leases renewed under the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act (ALTA), which slightly favours the tenants according to Fijian landlords while SDL pushed for the Native Land Trust Act (NLTA), which gives more favourable consideration to the interests of landlords. The NFP proposed a 'master plan' under which government would lease land from the landlords under the provisions of NLTA but then re-lease

them to tenants under ALTA. But this idea, too, remained in the background. I got the distinct feeling observing the campaign that both the major parties actually shied away from difficult issues in favour of simple messages sharply delivered.

Acutely aware of the changing demographics, the SDL played the race card effectively. With the electoral system favouring ethnic voting (46 of the 71 seats are contested on racial lines), and with the percentage of Indo-Fijians in the total population under 40 per cent, playing the race card made political sense, at least in the short term. Indigenous Fijians should control political power in Fiji, the SDL told the voters, while Labour quietly told its supporters that with the army on its side and with Indo-Fijian numbers decreasing, this might be the last chance for an Indo-Fijian to become prime minister. Shorn of all the campaign rhetoric, this issue, above all others, remained at the forefront of voters' consciousness.

The campaign itself was mild, lacking the drama of some previous elections, such as the Flower-Dove battle of 1977 or the Four Corners program about Australian involvement in Fijian politics, or even the Labour–NFP battles of the 1990s. Large campaign rallies, on the decline since the 1990s, were largely absent in this election, with most of the campaigning taking place in 'pocket meetings' and in debates on radio and television. Voting is compulsory in Fiji, but voters still expect to be transported to the polling booths, given food and drink and assistance with private problems. Most candidates agreed that the cost of the campaign was between F\$10,000 and F\$20,000, exorbitant by Fiji standards, with most expense associated with the purchase of yaqona. Voter apathy and avarice are problems of which all political parties are aware but are afraid to take any action for fear of retribution. There were some allegation of vote rigging, especially in closely contested seats, and two cases are before the courts, but international observers from the Commonwealth Secretariat and Forum Secretariat declared the election free and fair.

As indicated at the beginning, the real drama began once the election was over and the results were known. Qarase's offer to Labour to join his multiparty cabinet caught many by surprise, most of all Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhry. The national mood favourable toward power-sharing

notwithstanding, Chaudhry was wary of joining Qarase's cabinet. At first he tried to woo the two independents (Jioji Konrote and Robin Irwin) to form a Labour-led government. When that failed, he submitted nine Labour names for inclusion in the multiparty experiment, but insisted that as the parliamentary leader of the Labour Party, he should decide the allocation of portfolios for his members.

Qarase flatly rejected the idea on the sensible and entirely defensible grounds that the prerogative of deciding the allocation of portfolios should be his as prime minister (*Fiji Sun*, 23 May 2006). He had made the same point three years earlier when he had argued that the right of consultation with the opposition leader did not mean concurrence. 'I do not require Mr Chaudhry's agreement on whom I choose as ministers. The choice is the prime minister's' (*Pacific Islands Report*, 24 July 2003). Poseci Bune was moved from Labour's preferred Agriculture portfolio to Environment, Lekh Ram Vayshenoi from Local Government and Urban Development to Mineral and Energy, and Gyani Nand swapped portfolios with Bune. 'The Prime Minister is not acting in good faith', Chaudhry thundered. 'It is not a master-servant relationship' (*Daily Post*, 23 May 2006). This language was reminiscent of past politics and curiously jarring in the optimistic atmosphere of the post-election period.

Unable to force the prime minister's hand, Chaudhry sought to have himself appointed Leader of the Opposition, reportedly asking a Ba high chief, Tui Ba Ratu Sairusi Nagagavoka, to intercede with the president, his paramount chief, on his (Chaudhry's) behalf (*Fiji Times*, 5 July 2006). That Chaudhry lead the opposition while eight of his members were part of the government was a strange proposition. Attorney-General Qoriniasi Bale insisted, and the president was so advised, that by joining the multiparty system, Labour had effectively become a part of the government. Chaudhry's demand was contrary to the provision of the Korolevu Declaration of 26 January 1999, which Chaudhry himself had signed. That document provided that any party which participated in cabinet would not be deemed to be in opposition (*Fiji Times*, 23 June 2006). Chaudhry repudiated both the letter as well as the spirit of the Korolevu declaration. Finally, in a sad display of petulance, he refused to vacate the leader of the opposition's office in the parliamentary complex, forcing Mick Beddoes, the duly appointed opposition leader, to remain in his much smaller office.

These incidents, insignificant in themselves, were symbolically important—they sent the signal that Chaudhry was a reluctant supporter of the multiparty concept. His fears were real. He risked losing influence over his ministers in cabinet, losing control of the broad direction of the party, becoming a guest in his own house. He was also acutely aware of the political dangers of playing second fiddle to Qarase. Parties that had joined his Peoples' Coalition in 1999 (Christian Democrats and the Fijian Association Party) were defunct. The same fate befell the CAMV which had joined Qarase's government in 2001. Labour would not disappear; it was too big and established for that, but Chaudhry feared a diminished role for himself and his party. In his first parliamentary speech, Chaudhry drew the line. 'The FLP does not wish to be tainted with the scams, corruption, wastage of public funds and the incompetence that characterised the part Government'. He would set a timeframe and expect Labour's concerns to be addressed urgently. These included the enactment of a comprehensive code of conduct for all holders of high public office, the removal of racial discrimination from the affirmative action programs and the adoption of tough anti-corruption practices (*Hansard*, 8 June 2006).

Labour's dilemma was well summed up by Vice President Jon Madraiwiwii in his address to the thirty-fourth annual Congress of the Fiji Institute of Accountants on 23 June 2006.

The Fiji Labour Party faces dilemma of enormous proportions. Should it continue to cooperate, conceding to the Prime Minister much of the credit flowing therefrom? Is it not better that it withdraw from the Government and consolidate its position as the Opposition? Politics is about advantage, manoeuvre and counter-manoeuve. Given demographics and continuing high levels of emigration, its core support base will continue to diminish. There is little prospect that voting patterns will alter significantly over the next decade. Therefore, unless the FLP is able to attract significant Fijian support, it runs the real risk of remaining on the sidelines (*Fijivillage*, 4 July 2006)

Tensions surfaced early. One of Chaudhry's staunchest supporters in the Labour caucus, Lekh Ram Vayeshnoi, Minister for Energy and Mineral Resources, insisted that his loyalty lay totally with Chaudhry and that he would insist on pursuing Labour policies in cabinet. Several of his

colleagues, eager to make the new concept work, demurred publicly, causing further tension. Chaudhry supported Vayshnoi: ‘the FLP constitution states quite categorically that every member, whether a backbencher MP or a cabinet minister, must uphold the principles and objectives of the party. The directive here is very clear—we must be guided by party policies and principles in conducting ourselves’ (*Sunday Post*, 25 June, 2006). Sitiveni Rabuka supported Chaudhry, saying that the Labour leader was

...right in demanding that FLP cabinet ministers remain committed to party policies. Let us remember they have gone to join a multiparty cabinet, not an SDL Cabinet. They need to work on unity rather than uniformity as they are there with the mandate of the people who voted them in on the FLP policies that appealed to them (*Fiji Times*, 1 July 2006).

Krishna Datt, Labour Minister and one of the founders of the Labour Party, disagreed, saying in parliament that those leaders—he clearly had Chaudhry in mind—who could not work cooperatively in a multiparty set-up, who wanted to persist with their old ways, ‘must pass on their batons to others who are willing to try and I am very serious about that’ (*Hansard*, 8 June 2006). Responding directly to Chaudhry’s demand that FLP interests must be given priority by its Labour ministers, Datt said, ‘[t]his is one of the guiding principles of the Fiji Labour Party—to work in the public interest, in national interest and that is what we, FLP MPs who have accepted the cabinet posts, are required to do’ (*Daily Post*, 22 June 2006). For their part, Chaudhry loyalists in parliament boycotted Datt’s speech in parliament introducing the Employment Relations Bill.

Emboldened, some other senior members began to talk about the need for Chaudhry to change his confrontational style. Said Felix Anthony, one of the rebels,

I believe that the leadership style has to change. It has to be much more democratic in our decision making process. We need to practice what we preach to the world about transparency, democracy and accountability’ (*Fijilive*, 6 July 2006).

Chaudhry rejected the suggestion outright, and reverted to his old ways of unilateral decision making. He submitted his list of eight nominees for the senate, but doing so directly to the President rather than through the leader of the opposition whose nominees they technically are. The well-regarded former Senator Dr Atu Emberson-Bain was dropped in favour

of the lesser known Sachidanand Sharma who happened to be a relative of Chaudhry's. A former Vuda parliamentarian (Vijay Singh) was not included in the list even though Chaudhry had promised him a senate seat if he agreed to let Felix Anthony contest his seat. Nor were any of the senior members of the party's Management Board consulted about the nomination (*Fiji Sun*, 29 June 2006). While Chaudhry was away overseas, some of them submitted a different list to the leader of the opposition, but withdrew it when Beddoes stuck with Chaudhry's list. Some of the rebels did the unthinkable by questioning whether Chaudhry was in fact the parliamentary leader of the Labour Party, as he had not been elected to that position after the election, which is the normal Westminster convention.

With the split now out in the open, Chaudhry sought ways to discipline the dissidents. The Nasinu branch of the Labour Party expelled Datt from the party, and similar moves were afoot elsewhere. Chaudhry has promised to haul his wayward colleagues before the party's National Council, which consists largely of his supporters from the National Farmers Council. Chaudhry has many options at his disposal. He could, though with some difficulty, have the rebels sacked from the party, which would prompt a by-election. Or he could submit a new list for the cabinet, though the dearth of talent in the parliamentary Labour Party is conspicuous by its absence. There is no doubt that Labour's image has suffered a dent, for this is the first time in its twenty year history that there has been such a massive questioning of Labour leader's style and the party's direction from within its own ranks. Chaudhry is still popular with the rank and file of the party, but he is no longer viewed as invincible or indispensable.

Chaudhry's misery contrasts markedly with Qarase's position. The SDL leader is not the diffident man he was when he assumed office in 2001. He is now decisive, confident of his political skills and in the driver's seat. He has risen in national esteem for the magnanimous manner in which he has conducted himself, and especially for the apparent sincerity with which he has pursued the multiparty cabinet. But he must resist the temptations of hubris by insisting on the implementation of his election manifesto or by bringing controversial legislation before parliament early in its term. Doing so may damage the developing

amicable atmosphere in cabinet and give Mahendra Chaudhry the excuse he needs to opt out of government.

The multiparty cabinet is a novel concept for Fiji, but it has been practised in many European countries that practice forms of consociational democracy. It can work in Fiji if there is a will to make it work. Its success will require a change in the adversarial political culture spawned by the Westminster system since the advent of party politics in the 1960s. And it will require a more enlightened leadership with a genuinely overarching national vision for Fiji. The multiparty idea is Fiji's great challenge and also its great opportunity.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr Ganesh Chand and Professor Wadan Narsey for these figures, although they are available in several places. Election details are found at <http://www.elections.gov.fj>. and [fijilive.com/elections](http://fijilive.com/elections) 2006 . I have documented this piece lightly as the details are easily accessible on all major news websites about Fiji.