

Preface

Fiji is a bit like Churchill's Russia, a 'riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.' Here is an island nation, easily the most developed in the South Pacific, with a talented multiethnic population that would be the envy of many a underdeveloped nation, the hub of regional transportation and communication links, the home of international diplomatic, educational and aid organisations—it has everything going for it. And yet, despite this good fortune, it is strangely prone to debilitating self-inflicted wounds that hobble its prospects and dent its future. The two military coups in 1987 and the attempted putsch in 2000 have strained race relations, damaged the economy, infected public institutions with the virus of mismanagement and failing accountability, nurtured religious intolerance and periodic acts of sacrilege against non-Christians, disrupted improvements to essential infrastructure, education and social and medical services, and led to a mass exodus of some of its best and brightest citizens.

This indictment may seem harsh, for on the surface things look normal. Despite all the temptations, inducements and provocations, Fiji has not descended into a bloodbath of the type common in other developing regions. There are no unmarked mass graves, no long knives in the night. Certain institutions—the judiciary, for instance—bravely continue to uphold the rule of law despite intimidation and subversion through political interference. The press is free. But the overwhelming sense in Fiji is of the essential fragility of things, the sense that things could go wrong at any time. The almost daily reports of verbal exchanges between the military leadership and the government about who is the ultimate custodian of the national interest underlines the point. As I write this (October 2005), the Fijian Minister for Home Affairs informs the media that the Commander of the Fiji Military Forces and his family need protection because not all the ammunition stolen from the army has been returned and rogue elements continue to roam the land. And the government is contemplating passing legislation to give traditional chiefs immunity from prosecution 'for certain kinds of activities', such as trying to 'resolve disputes in volatile situations' however illegal that activity might be. I suppose it is not so much whether things are not as bad as they ought to be or could have been. It is, rather, whether things could be, could have been, much better.

Why is Fiji prone to periodic political turbulence? What is its source and how can it best be resolved? I address these issues historically by focusing on the last two decades of Fiji's post-independence life, including the period since George Speight's attempted putsch in 2000. These years, full of drama, chaos, anxiety and apprehension, capture the essence of the conflict in Fiji, its roots and routes, the issues that inflame public opinion, the rhetoric that is used to mobilise support in the electorate for particular political purposes and the end to which that support is put. There are various ways of charting the contours of a country's political evolution. Here, after the introductory survey chapters, I use elections to measure the tone and temperature of political discourse in Fiji. I choose elections as the vehicle for my analysis because it is during elections, more than at any other time, when deeply held views and contentious issues are brought to the fore, when the public gets engaged, however briefly or fleetingly, with major public issues of the day, when the limits of political parameters are truly stretched and tested and exposed, and when politics is at its rawest.

The fundamental cause of Fiji's problem, I argue, is its obsession with race, with its entrenchment in the political process and in public policy. The inevitable result of this preoccupation is that every issue, every concern, is seen through the prism of ethnic, as opposed to national, interest. Ethnic fears and prejudices are cynically exploited for political purposes during elections. The appeal to ethnicity and ethnic identity is fostered through a racially compartmentalised electoral system in which two-thirds of the seats in parliament are elected on racial rolls, and the remaining on open non-racial rolls. The logic of the system is for political parties, which are essentially racially based, to consolidate their own ethnic constituency and wrest enough numbers from their opponent's to win power. Divide and Rule. When political competition is equated with ethnic competition in a zero-sum struggle, the potential for conflict and tension increases dramatically.

Not only electoral politics but public memory is racially archived as well. Fiji citizens entering or leaving the country are required to state their 'race' on the arrival and departure cards. They are required to declare their race when taking out a driver's licence or opening a bank account. The government has adopted a race-based affirmative action policy in favour of the indigenous Rotuman and Fijian communities, and there is a 'blueprint' to promote Fijians in commerce and industry where their success is unremarkable (though slowly growing). The penultimate year

of secondary education is fee-exempt for Fijian students but not for children from other ethnic groups. Fifty per cent of all the taxi licences are now reserved for the indigenous community, and the higher echelons of the public service are dominated by them as well. Schools which are designated 'Fijian' receive special government subsidy, but not non-Fijian schools, even though in many cases over 50 per cent of their students are indigenous Fijians. In short, race stares at you in most areas of the public sector. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, Fiji's first prime minister, often said that race was a fact of life in Fiji. If present policies continue, it will become a way of life for its people. The reality, of course, is that race is one among many and perhaps more important facts of life such as unemployment, poverty, urban violence, collapsing infrastructure, corruption in public life, misuse of public office. The list is endless.

There are other causes of tension as well. Among the most important of these is land. By law, native land—some 83 per cent of the total land area of Fiji—is held in inalienable right by the indigenous Fijians. In the 1990s, the government transferred all the former Crown Land to the Native Land Trust Board with the result that now nearly 90 per cent of all land is in Fijian ownership. On the other hand the bulk of the commercial farmers, particularly in the sugar industry, are Indo-Fijians. To the Fijians land is more than a commodity to be disposed of in the market place or a simple commercial proposition. The attachment to land is deep, almost mystical, as a source of pride and identity. Not all the land is cultivable. And in recent years, the Fijian population itself has increased and demanded the termination of leases when these expire. The Fijian predicament is understandable, but so, too, is the dire situation facing the Indo-Fijian community. The 30-year leases which they acquired in the late 1960s began expiring in the late 1990s, with the landowners refusing renewal, or renewing them on terms favourable to themselves. Forced off the lands on which they have lived for generations, the evictees, unskilled and often unlettered, start a new, uncertain future while their formerly productive farms decline or revert to bush. The nation suffers, and the anguish of eviction is deep.

Another source of conflict is about who should be allowed the rein of political leadership in Fiji. Fijians, though not all of them by any means, insist that national leadership should be in Fijian hands. Without that, Fiji will know no peace. Fijian interests should be paramount in Fiji. For their part, the Indo-Fijian community insists that ideology, not primordiality, should form the foundations of Fiji's political system, that the state should be race-neutral in its obligations and responsibilities to

its citizens. The Fijian view that they can trust only their own leaders derives from the political culture of the twentieth century that encouraged the three races to entrust their future to their own ethnic representatives. Their high ranking leaders, sometimes even paramount chiefs, were also their political leaders, people of towering personalities and overarching influence, trained by the British to assume power when Fiji became independent. But they have all moved on, and no clear successor of broad influence and authority is clearly visible. Many aspiring Fijian leaders are embroiled in local and regional issues. Moreover, they—and Indo-Fijians' leaders, too—lack the experience and cross-cultural skills to provide the kind of leadership needed for a divided multiethnic nation like Fiji.

There was a time, long gone now, when the two major communities had little in common. Fijians lived a subsistence lifestyle and Indo-Fijians were in the commercial agricultural sector. The opportunities for interaction between them were limited—and discouraged by the authorities. But in recent decades, modernity and the challenges and opportunities of globalisation have perforce fostered closer interaction. I cite two examples from popular culture to illustrate this point. Bollywood movies, which once attracted an exclusively Indo-Fijian audience, are now so popular with Fijians that some of the films are dubbed in Fijian. This would have been unthinkable a decade ago. And rugby, once a mystery game to most Indo-Fijians, is now followed by them with great knowledge and passion. When Indo-Fijian grandmothers go 'ga-ga' over Sevens' maestro Waisale Serevi, it is time to take notice of change. There are many other such examples of cross-cultural intersections and insurrections which pervade the daily life in Fiji.

The unity, imposed by the colonial government and nurtured by paramount chiefs through the course of the twentieth century, is now becoming frayed. This was once a taboo subject, but it is now the topic of public talk. There are many reasons for this. The absence of paramount chiefs at the helm of national leadership is one. When they were alive, the chiefs' wisdom and guidance were seldom questioned or questioned only in hushed tones. The effects of modern education have undermined the traditional ideology that the business of government is solely the business of chiefs. More and more Fijians are living in urban and peri-urban areas, exposed to all the challenges and opportunities which urbanisation brings. There is now in Fiji a large and growing Fijian middle class, filling the gap left by departing Indo-Fijians, which is much more firmly enmeshed into the modern economy than ever before. Fijian

women and men selling root crops, vegetables, fish, crabs, prawns in urban stalls or on footpaths or along highways in large numbers could not have been imagined a decade ago. Money economy has penetrated the Fijian households and the Fijian hinterland in profound, life-altering ways. Traditional institutions are coming under increasing pressure.

Social and economic fragmentation in the indigenous community is also accompanied by greater and very public debate about power-sharing and redistribution of power among the Fijians. Western Fijian dissent and demand for appropriate representation in national decision-making to reflect the contribution their region makes to the national economy has long been well-known. Gold, pine, sugar and tourism are all located in western Viti Levu. But there are other sources of friction and dissension as well. The eastern provinces rose to ascendancy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and consolidated their hold as the century progressed, to the quiet disappointment of their former rivals. In the 2000 putsch, no attempt was made to hide the fact that the rebels had, as one part of their agenda, the restoration of the primacy of the Kubuna confederacy. George Speight spoke of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara in insultingly disrespectful terms and demanded his resignation.

These internal debates will continue to influence the pattern and direction of Fijian—and national—politics, now more so than in the past. For long, the fear of Indian dominance was an important factor propelling the political unity of the Fijians. But that fear has been declining as Fijians realise the power—military and civilian—they have in their hands and as Indo-Fijian population continues to decline through as lower birth rate and emigration. It is projected to be 37 per cent of the national population in the next few years. This demographic shift has important implications for the way politics will operate in Fiji in the future. It seems inescapable that the future directions in national politics will be determined by the interests and impulses of the indigenous community.

Many essays in this volume appeared in different incarnations over a period of years, written in different moods for different purposes and audiences. They have been revised or otherwise amended to give the book structure, intellectual coherence and narrative flow. They are my attempt to decipher the patterns of a recent past of a country to which I am inextricably linked both emotionally and intellectually, and in whose recent public life I have played a minor role. The essays, then, speak

from a position of active interest and concern, not from disinterested, detached observation. If this volume contributes to a more informed debate about Fiji's recent past and prognostications about its future, especially in Fiji itself, it will have achieved its purpose. *Et res non semper, spes mihi semper adest.*

Afterword

Since this book was written, an election has taken place (May 2006), Fiji's tenth since independence. I discuss this election in Chapter 10. After the elections, a multi-party government came into existence. This experiment has raised the hope among the people of Fiji that a new beginning towards more inclusive, non-racial politics may be on the horizon. But it is too early to tell.

A note on sources

In different forms the essays in this volume began life as talks and seminar presentations and articles published in *Pacific Studies*, *The Contemporary Pacific*, *Journal of Pacific History* and *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*. They have, for the most part, been inaccessible to ordinary readers and observers of political developments in Fiji. I hope that this collection will rectify this.

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