14. Politics and Leadership

There has never been any shortage of self-proclaimed political leaders in Fiji.

While living in the isolation of Taveuni during my childhood years, the term ‘politics’ was seldom used, for there was no such thing as party politics. We only knew of the colonial administrators who ran the affairs of the nation. That began to change in the 1960s as Fiji was steered towards independence and local leaders were given more authority and assumed the stance of politicians.

My first experience of such a person was when Freddie Archibald was voted into the Legislative Council. Freddie was a part-European from Savusavu. He was a small copra producer who enjoyed expressing his own opinions and he took little notice of the highbrow attitude of the Taveuni planters who voted him into office on a number of occasions. His only opponent in these elections was Harold Gibson, a lawyer from Labasa. Harold had a high-pitched voice and looked untidy. He was regarded by the Taveuni people as a rather shady kind of fellow who had made a great deal of money out of the cane farmers in the Labasa area. He was certainly the most powerful man in the area, was mayor for many years, and owned the only hotel, the Grand Eastern, which was far from grand.

Just prior to elections, Freddie and Gibo (as Gibson was called) would visit the Taveuni constituency and listen to the complaints about the government and promise to fix everything if they were elected. When one was elected and went into Legislative Council and failed to make good on his promises, he was voted out at the next election. During one of his periods in office, Freddie had a mental breakdown and was seen running down the main street of Suva without his pants on. He spent some time in the mental asylum but was released in due course and went back to his duties in the Council. During a heated debate, Freddie stood up, waved a piece of paper at the Speaker and said, ‘Mr Speaker, I am the only one in this House with a certificate to say that I am sane.’

Political maturity came to Fiji in 1970, when the nation was granted independence by Britain. One of the unique features of Fiji’s relationship with Britain was that it was never conquered. The chiefs voluntarily ceded the islands to Queen Victoria in 1874. When the winds of change swept across the British Empire, Fiji didn’t have to fight for its independence, the people asked for it, and it was granted.

Patriotism is an old emotion that touches some but not others. For me, Independence Day on the 10th October 1970 was one of the most moving days of my life. Albert Park, in the heart of Suva, was the centre of the celebrations. Prince Charles came, on behalf of the Queen, to deliver the instruments of
independence to the Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. Stands for the public were set up around the park and the dignitaries of all races, dressed in their best, watched the ritual process. There were cultural displays by Fijians, Indians, Chinese, Europeans and other Pacific Islanders who called Fiji home. The police and army bands gave stirring displays. As the sun set, the Union Jack was lowered for the last time. The bugler’s solemn notes echoed across a silent crowd, many of whom wondered, ‘What happens to Fiji now?’ There were, of course, plenty of prophets of doom. But the next morning a huge crowd gathered again to watch the Pacific blue Fiji flag being raised to the masthead in the middle of the park, and the new national anthem was played for the first time. There was an enormous surge of emotional pride and, 45 years after the event, I can still feel my chest heave and remember the tears trickling down my cheeks. It was one of the few moments in our history when all the population, of so many racial groups, thought of themselves in non-racial terms.

Fiji was fortunate that it was not led into independence by a pack of power hungry politicians, but by a distinguished group of Fijian chiefs. Ratu Mara, Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu George Cakobau and Ratu Penaia Ganilau had been groomed from birth to lead their people, and the colonial powers wisely decided to mould them into national leaders. They did not take up office for their own personal gain. They did not crave power. They looked upon their political leadership as a responsibility to their people, be they Fijian, Indian or others. They commanded respect by the way they conducted themselves.

This is not to say that Fiji was free of traditional politics. I was thrown into the fray when I began to work in the sugar industry, for it was the cauldron of Indian politics. One quarter of the population of Fiji had direct links to sugar, so winning the cane community vote was a vital stepping stone to national power. Politicians have a habit of promising to fight for whatever they think the voters want, regardless of the merits of the demands. Cane farmers had always been heavily in debt to moneylenders, storekeepers and banks. This was partly due to the fact that they only got four payments a year for their crop and they had a cash flow problem. To alleviate this, the sugar industry leaders decided to initiate a compulsory savings scheme which involved deducting a certain sum from each ton of cane and putting it into a farmers’ fund. Initially, there was a lot of support for this but when the political leaders began to feel the pulse of opposition and began speaking out against it, the Sugar Board had to go out and sell the concept.

At this time, my Chairman was away and the Vice Chairman, Faiz Sherani, an Indian lawyer, was acting. Faiz was an urbane, cultured, soft-spoken Muslim who dressed immaculately, smoked cigars, drank and tried to avoid confrontation. Rather reluctantly, he agreed that I arrange a series of meetings in the cane areas so that he could explain the merits of the scheme. Our plan was to fly from
Nausori Airport to Nadi, pick up a car and go to the first meeting. Unbeknown to us, the farmers’ political leaders had decided to deal with us at Nadi Airport and they arranged buses to bring hundreds of farmers to the airport. When the plane landed and taxied to the terminal, we looked out the window and saw the throng of farmers with banners. We knew from experience what the mood would be and Faiz turned to me and said, ‘I am not going in there.’ It was only after I had pointed out how bad it would look if we stayed on the plane that he very reluctantly moved. Trying to stand tall and brave, we strode towards the farmers who began chanting when they saw us. In no time, we were swallowed up by the crowd who pressed us on all sides, yelling demands and shaking their fists. Faiz carried himself with great aplomb until they ran out of steam and he was able to address those nearest to him and they let us through. Although it was extremely uncomfortable, there was no malice nor personal threat. It was noticeable, however, that Faiz drank a lot more whisky than usual that evening. Eventually the politicians had their way on this issue and the savings scheme was abandoned.

Politicians didn’t just stir up cane farmers. The mill workers were also their target. On one occasion in 1973 the four mills ground to a halt as members of the largest union downed tools. My Chairman, Sir Ian Thompson, who had the responsibility of settling disputes, did his best to resolve the matter, but the strike dragged on. Eventually, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau phoned and asked if he could help. This wasn’t his area of responsibility but Fiji and its economic well being was his concern. He was that kind of man. Sir Ian welcomed his offer and the three of us decided to go to the mills and meet the workers. At Lautoka, thousands were gathered in an old wooden hall close to the mill. As we approached from a distance we could hear the angry yelling of workers condemning the sugar company and the government. It was quite unnerving. When we entered the hall we found it packed to capacity with angry people and I could feel the hostility and tension. It was like a keg of dynamite with a short fuse that was hissing and crackling towards an explosion. We followed Ratu Sir Penaia as he strode with military precision, scowl on his face, down the centre of the hall where a table and chairs were set. The noise began to subside as the men became aware of Ratu Penaia’s commanding presence. We sat, the workers all around us, and waited, not saying a word, until there was a complete hush. Sir Ian rose and introduced Ratu Sir Penaia. He remained seated as he spoke in a slow, well-modulated voice. Then he launched into a pep talk the likes of which I have never heard. The atmosphere in the hall changed as the men wilted before his stinging condemnation. Even the political agitators were fearful of pressing their demands. There was absolute silence. He then handed over to Sir Ian, who gave the mill workers a chance to speak and air their grievances. It was all done in an orderly manner and a way of resolving the matter was agreed. We then went on to the other three mills and the strike ended.
Some years later, I was to write Ratu Sir Penaia’s biography and became very close to this man who had been a loyal civil servant, rugby player for Fiji, commander of a battalion in Malaya, District Officer, Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Governor-General and President. He was the central figure in a huge and devoted family. A big man in every way, he would often put his huge arms around my shoulders and laugh about something. Although he had that common touch and could have fun with just about anyone, the aura of chiefliness and dignity never left him. Even when General Rabuka was at the height of his power as a coup leader in 1987, he paid homage to Ratu Penaia by sitting on the floor before him.

Another of those who led Fiji through the transition from colony to dominion was Ratu Sir George Cakobau. He came up through the same process as Ratu Penaia and was to become the first local Governor-General. Shortly after his appointment I was asked by a magazine to write an article on him. He suggested I go to Government House for the occasion of his accepting the credentials of the new Japanese Ambassador to Fiji. As I stood in the richly decorated reception hall of Government House and observed the ceremony, I mused on how circumstances had changed. The dapper and dignified Japanese Ambassador was in full morning dress and bowed deeply as he presented his documents. Ratu Sir George was in the Fijian version of morning dress. The upper part was traditional, but he wore a striped sulu instead of pants, and had polished black sandals on his feet. He was a fine looking man with a thick crop of silver hair, large sparkling eyes and full lips that carried a rather mischievous smile. What intrigued me was that there, before me, was the epitome of a courtly and dignified gentleman, yet a mere hundred years ago Ratu George’s grandfather was engaged in club warfare and ate his enemies with relish.

He suggested rather than have the interview for the magazine at Government House, which I think he felt carried a stigma of colonialism, we should go to his home on the chiefly island of Bau. It was from this tiny speck of land that his grandfather had ruled Fiji. Ratu George had of necessity made many adjustments during his life. He was the Vunivalu, the paramount chief of Fiji, as was his grandfather, which set him apart from others. Yet he had to perform like a good civil servant and as a Minister of the Crown. When he became Governor General he should have been above politics but, as the leader of his people, that was difficult. It was a fine line that he had to walk but he did it with great skill. Obviously he satisfied the Queen, because she bestowed on him a very rare decoration, the Royal Victorian Chain.

The thing that really struck one about Ratu George was his adaptability. Here was a man who believed there was a ‘Vu’ (a friendly spirit) watching over him, yet he adhered staunchly to the Methodist teachings of Christ. He could wear a
sulu or a tuxedo with equal style, drink yaqona or sip brandy from a balloon, or stride through corridors of Buckingham Palace with the same poise and dignity with which he waded across the mud flats to Bau Island.

Ratu Sir Edward Cakobau was the third of the four chiefs who led Fiji into independence. He had a good deal of Tongan blood in him and was groomed in the Royal Tongan court. While he exuded chieftiness and had the biggest following of all the chiefs, he was a man who loved life and often told self-deprecating stories. He was a great raconteur and loved to stand at a bar with a glass in his hand—always a full glass inside an empty one—and regale a loyal audience. One oft repeated story he told was about a sea voyage he made to England. He was seated at the Captain’s table and was telling the captive group outrageous stories about Fiji’s cannibal past when the steward brought him the menu, which he studied for a while. He then turned to him and said, ‘Bring me the passenger list.’

I hesitate to call any of these three ‘politicians’, in the disparaging sense that the term is often used. They were skilled administrators and outstanding leaders. People of all races and all levels of society loved them. Certainly they had human faults but they were honest men who saw the big picture and always tried to do the greatest good for the greatest number.

Ratu Sir Kamises Mara, on the other hand, while having the attributes of the other three, was a very skilled politician. It was he who forged the Alliance Party after independence, bringing together Fijians, Indians and people of other races in one party. He led with an autocratic style and few questioned his decisions. Unlike the others, he was aloof and sensitive to insult. It was said that if you crossed Ratu Mara he would never forgive you. He had wisdom and knowledge that few others possessed and a toughness that enabled him to win many concessions for the people of Fiji and the Pacific from the international community. While he was held in high esteem and respect by the people of Fiji, he was not loved with the kind of adoration was bestowed on Ratu Edward and Ratu Penaia.

In 1977, Fiji was shocked when many Fijians turned their back on Ratu Mara’s Alliance Party and voted for an Indian party. This party captured many Fijian votes, which resulted in Koya’s Indian National Federation Party winning the election by a slim margin. Ratu Mara was preparing to clean out his office and go back to his chiefly island of Lakeba when he received a summons from the Governor General, Ratu Sir George, to say he was appointing him a minority Prime Minister. Koya had tried for four days to get his party to agree that he should be Prime Minister, but they wouldn’t have it. Finally, in desperation, they did agree and Koya went to Government House only to be told that he was
too late. Mara had been sworn in. In many ways, I am sure it was a relief to Koya, for he was at heart a defense lawyer. He would have preferred to be Leader of the Opposition rather than Prime Minister.

Koya was one of the most arrogant men I have ever known. He was full of bluff and bluster. He was an actor and a chest-thumping orator and lacked any social skills. When Timoci Bavadra, who won the elections in 1987 and became Prime Minister, died, his funeral was held at Viseisei. It is customary in Fiji for groups of people to go to the place of the funeral, pay homage and present gifts to the family of the deceased. It was agreed that a joint sugar group should go the village and present what is called a ‘reguregu’. As Chairman of the Sugar Cane Growers Council, Koya was asked to lead the group and be at the village at two pm About 50 of us were there on time but when the heralds told us it was our turn we had to say we were not ready as Koya had not yet arrived. It was most disrespectful. We waited for 45 minutes, holding up others. As the next most senior person there, I decided we could wait no longer and we went in to make our presentation. Just as we were leaving the village Koya turned up and appeared shocked that we had proceeded without him. When I told him why, he was furious and he didn’t talk to me for a long time after that. It was the nature of the man.

It is strange how life rewards some and punishes others. We all thought Koya had a very successful legal practice, but he died at a relatively young age and his estate was worth very little. A short while after he passed on, his office, which was in an old wooden building in Lautoka, was burnt to the ground, destroying all his files and records. I had known his wife and found her to be a very pleasant person. I was therefore shocked when she was charged with arson and sent to jail.

I was never interested in entering politics but there came a time in the 1990s when Fiji was heading into troubled waters when one could not just stand back and do nothing. We non-Fijians had our own party and elected three people to parliament. We didn’t have much influence, but one or more of our elected members usually ended up in cabinet. I began attending constituency meetings of our party to help steer them in what I thought was the right direction and before long I was writing speeches for our member in the House. He was not very articulate and was noted for being the appointed person to second any motion put before the members. He must have stood up hundreds of time to say, ‘Mr Speaker Sir, I second the motion.’ It was about all he ever did. He wasn’t much use to us but he knew how to win votes and get elected. The members of the General Voters Party were a mixed lot. There were high-powered businessmen and women, Chinese market gardeners, part-European tradesmen, Melanesians from the Solomons, and Micronesians from Tuvalu and Ocean Island, all of whom had made Fiji their home. There were only a handful of Europeans like
myself. At one time it was suggested that I stand for President of the party, but I declined, saying that as I was still working in the sugar industry I had to be impartial. The trouble with the General Voters Party was that, though they were small in number, there were serious divisions and too many people with personal agendas. The party eventually split into three groups.

In the second half of the 20th century, people of all races played an influential part in the politics of Fiji. But that began to change as Indians and others lost their influence. Politics became dominated by Fijian politics. Throughout their history, Fijians have been accustomed to living within their chiefly system, which has been the mainstay of their society. All customs and traditions revolved around the chief. The focus at any ceremony was the chief. Order was maintained by the chief. Many Fijians drifted into the urban areas and became academics, businesspeople, professionals and became distant from the chiefly domination. Others had been educated to the point that they don’t see the need for the chiefly system. For them, the demise of the chiefly system would be no loss. Some may like to see it preserved as part of their tradition and heritage, but they don’t want it to dominate their lives. In the long term, the domination of the chiefs as an elite group is bound to end. We live in an era of the common person and their voices cannot be stifled or ignored.

The end of the era of the ruling chiefs came in 1987 when the Labour Party leader Timoci Bavadra became Prime Minister of Fiji. Bavadra was a kindly, decent civil servant of lowly chiefly rank. Some would say that while he was nominally Prime Minister, the real power was vested in the hands of Mahendra Chaudhry, and that the subsequent coup was more against Indian leadership than Bavadra.

The man who removed him from power, Army Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, had no chiefly standing, but he had a commanding presence and the bearing of a chief. He had a strong, warm personality with a keen sense of humour and he was extremely intelligent. There was no question about his leadership ability and he commanded respect as a soldier and subsequently as a politician. Many would deplore his moral values and at one time he openly confessed to being a ‘carnal man.’

Rabuka skillfully transformed himself from a soldier to a political man of the world and he quickly ingratiated himself with both local and overseas leaders. When he staged his military coup he was clearly a champion of Fijian indigenous rights but during the 1990s he and Jai Ram Reddy, the leader of the National Federation Party, worked towards a new constitution that would be a model of multi-racial equity. In fact, he moved so far to the centre that at national elections in 1999 the Fijian electorate dumped him in an unprecedented fashion.
He would never recover from this election failure. Although he was a man of considerable talent, and indeed he had a lot to offer Fiji, he was never again called upon to carry out any national duty. He became a discarded man. Allegations were made that he had something to do with the military uprising in 2000 but he was never charged.

The civilian coup by George Speight in 2000 brought another commoner into the Prime Minister’s office. Laisenia Qarase spent his working life in the civil service and at the time of the coup was head of the Fiji Development Bank. Though serving as a senator, he was an unlikely kind of politician, for he was reserved and introspective. When he was invited by the military leader Bainimarama to lead the government, there was considerable surprise and doubt about his ability to lead the nation out of crisis.

Being a technocrat, he skillfully managed the affairs of government, but he never really mastered the art of politics. As a result, he was manipulated by those more adept in the political arena. Politics is not usually the stage for people of integrity, and Qarase found himself surrounded by many unscrupulous opportunists. He was caught up in the multi-party experiment that was an integral provision of the constitution. No one really knew how to apply the arrangements but Qarase was determined to try to comply. He could not afford to alienate his own elected Fijian party cabinet ministers by dropping some, so, in order to accommodate the Labour party nominees, he had to create a cabinet of 36 members. The cost of this was astronomical.

Laisenia Qarase became Prime Minister in a coalition with a nationalist political party following the elections in 2001. This saw the return to overtly racial policies and programs of affirmative action. The rationale for this was that the only way to ensure security and stability was to address (and prioritise) indigenous Fijian grievances over issues to do with land, resources, identity and so on.

This pandering to ethno-nationalism was opposed by the military commander Commodore Voreqe, leading to a deepening tension between the government and army between 2001 and 2006.

Following a return to power by the Qarase government in elections in May 2006, the military mounted a coup in December—labeled a ‘clean up campaign’—aimed at eradicating corruption and racial politics. As a result of this coup, Commodore Bainimarama became Interim Prime Minister.

I was saddened by the removal of Qarase for I had served on many Boards and Committees with him over the years. I always considered him to be a man of the highest level of integrity. He was extremely devout and during his time as
Prime Minister I regularly attended a prayer breakfast with him. Leadership was always high on the agenda of our discussions and he was a great supporter of the Leadership Fiji Programme that I helped to run.

One of the most damaging effects of the coups of 1987 and 2000 was the migration of talented people from Fiji. Many of these were our next generation of leaders. This was the prime reason that I joined with a group of concerned people in setting up Leadership Fiji. It is a programme modeled on one that has been running in Victoria, Australia, for many years. The object is not so much skills training but seeks to develop a person’s understanding of the real issues facing the nation. It is common among many professional people to be so focused on their careers that they pay little attention to matters outside their offices. This programme sought to prepare people in the 35-year-old age group for the time when they would head their organisations. We sought to take in 28 people for a ten month period and tried to get a racial, gender, vocational and regional balance so the group would be dynamic.

Each year when we completed a programme and a group of people graduated, I felt a tremendous surge of optimism about the future of Fiji for there was clearly a wealth of talented leaders in the community and I felt confident about their ability to lead in all walks of life.

Bainimarama was another commoner and in ousting Qarase he sidelined the paramount chiefs. Qarase had cleverly included chiefs from all the confederacies in his cabinet. In doing so, he united the Fijians, but he had also created a monster that Fiji could not afford. Bainimarama’s claim was that many of the chiefs were implicated in the 2000 coup and, while some may have been charged and convicted, they had been let out of jail under compulsory supervision orders. He further claimed that many of the chiefs had abused their power and grown rich at the expense of the taxpayer. One of his first actions was to close down the operations of the Great Council of Chiefs, which since cession, had contained the collective wisdom and been the voice of the Fijian people. Only the Great Council of Chiefs had the constitutional power to appoint the President and Vice President.

Bainimarama’s rise to power in the military and as Prime Minister came as a surprise to many people. He had the reputation as a fine sailor. When writing the biography of Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau I was told that, in 1985, Ratu Penaia travelled by the Royal Naval ship Kikau to the small island of Ceva-i-ra at the extreme edge of Fiji’s nautical border, and Bainimarama, who was captain of the vessel, saved his life. The Kikau was an old wooden minesweeper that had been ‘given’ to Fiji by the United States. Just north of the island they ran into a vicious storm. Huge waves battered the ship, smashing the bridge and putting one of her two engines out of action. A mayday message was sent out and the
crew prepared to abandon ship. According to Ratu Penaia, Bainimarama kept his cool, and in a report on the incident Ratu Penaia said, ‘The Commanding Officer, Lt. Frank Bainimarama, bore himself in exemplary manner at all times and the behaviour of those under his command was equally praiseworthy.’

The appointment of Bainimarama, a naval person, to head up the military was seen as a slap in the face to senior army colonels, but he consolidated his position and weathered the military uprising in 2000 when he was nearly shot. While he obviously had military skills and was respected as a leader, he was not a chief, indeed he seemed to treat the chiefs with a certain degree of contempt.

But he proved to be a very skilled political leader, albeit one who has never gone out to campaign for votes until the September 2014 elections which his Fiji First party convincingly won. He has surrounded himself with competent people, identified problem issues and took what he regarded to be appropriate actions. Of course none of his new policies had the consent of the people. Few citizens are happy about their inability to object to anything his government has done, nor of the suppression of many human rights. But it cannot be denied that he has produced a favourable balance sheet for Fiji.

While relations with Australia, New Zealand, the United States, European Union and United Kingdom became somewhat strained, he has effectively re-directed Fiji towards China and South East Asia, where he is apparently held in high regard. On the international stage, he has frequently addressed the United Nations and has chaired the Group of 77 and China and the International Sugar Organisation.

On the home front, he has been conducting himself like a natural political leader by giving frequent addresses to organisations all over the country, opening government projects to benefit the community, and has effectively been recognised as the Prime Minister of Fiji.