

8

The strategic impasse: Mahendra Chaudhry and the Fiji Labour Party

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Leading the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) into its sixth general election, Mahendra Pal Chaudhry showed every sign of being a confident leader-in-waiting. Formed in 1985 on the crest of a wave of support from workers and the general public, resulting from a series of wage increases won from the stand-offish and aloof government of Ratu Mara, his FLP had, by the late 1990s, risen to a position of ascendancy in the Fiji Indian community. Chaudhry's overthrow in the coup of May 2000 served to cement his reputation as a die-hard fighter against injustice and a standard-bearer for the cause of Fiji's impoverished and oppressed citizens. He was a scourge to those who dared to cross him. Still vivid in the minds of those working in the Toorak office of the Supervisor of Elections during the run-up to the 2006 election was his verbal threat to the besieged incumbent, Semesa Karavaki, that Karavaki would be a 'sorry man' when the election was over.

A series of Tebbutt polls held in the lead-up to the 2006 general election confirmed that Chaudhry was the undisputed leader of the Indian community.¹ Harrying the government for 'incompetence' and 'racism', and drawing on the old cane field bases of FLP support, Chaudhry had won the backing of Indian professionals in the towns – even some bankers and businessmen – as well as many urban trade unionists. The only other Indian-led party, the National Federation Party (NFP), seemed like a spent force, not helped by its inability to find a successor with the charisma and the stature of its former leader, Justice

Jai Ram Reddy. Chaudhry thus had many reasons to feel that he would return as prime minister.

Chaudhry's FLP had also been buoyed by some significant successes in the battle with the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL)-led government, mainly the result of smart, strategic manoeuvres. Court victories in the landmark Chandrika Prasad case in March 2001, and successive triumphs in the legal controversies over the multiparty cabinet during 2001–2004 had, the FLP hoped, thrown into question the legitimacy of the Fijian-dominated SDL government. Labour had managed to block the Bill to transfer agricultural land leases from ALTA (Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act) to NLTA (Native Land Trust Act) by denying the government the two-thirds vote majority it required as a result of constitutional protections connected to land legislation. A solution to the problem of expiring land leases remained elusive, with SDL policy on the issue meeting the same fate as had befallen that of previous administrations. As a result, Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase went to the poll smarting from the experience of parliamentary blockages, whilst Chaudhry had succeeded in reconsolidating his support within his power base, the Indian tenant farmer community.

There were other seeming triumphs in the propaganda war. The controversial Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity (RTU) Bill was introduced by Qarase in order to placate the SDL's junior coalition partner, the Conservative Alliance–Matanitu Vanua (CAMV) party. The amnesty provisions in that Bill might have made it possible to release from prison several CAMV leaders convicted of offences committed during the coup/standoff of May–July 2000 and the associated mutiny of November in that year. The SDL had wanted to bring the Bill into law before the 2006 polls, but Labour boycotted the parliamentary discussions. Many in the country were vehemently opposed to the proposed amnesty provisions, although the RTU Bill did have the backing, with some reservations, of the Great Council of Chiefs and the 14 provincial councils. In the end, time ran out, and the SDL went into the election with the political fallout of another unfulfilled promise tarnishing its reputation, while Chaudhry and his FLP registered yet another public relations triumph. As with the land lease bill, Chaudhry's tactics were to make Qarase and his SDL party appear ineffective, continuing what the Labour leader took to be a long legacy of failure of post-independence Fijian leadership.

Labour's strong support from Indian voters was not in doubt, as the December 2004 Tavua Open by-election result had shown.² Indian support alone, however, could give the FLP only around 23 or 24 seats, short of the 36 required to form government. Less certain was the extent of support from indigenous Fijian and general voters, which would be critical if the FLP were to win the additional 12 or 13 seats. The other alternative for the FLP was to build an effective coalition, but that depended on allied parties making strong showings in the open constituencies, or in the General, Rotuman and Fijian communal constituencies. Above all, what were needed were political parties that took votes away from the SDL, the other major contender for office.

Chaudhry hoped that repeating previous strategies would work well again in 2006. That meant taking the moral high ground by steering clear of the racial debate and focusing on 'bread and butter' issues. Labour's television advertisements, as well as the party manifesto, concentrated on such issues as the state of the economy, job creation, better housing, alleviation of poverty, cheaper education, better health services, prudent financial management, more appropriate rural development, infrastructure and utilities and the strengthening of law and order. Labour also campaigned on the supposedly great achievements of its 1999–2000 government – claiming credit, for example, for an increase in the GDP growth rate over those years – and contrasting this with alleged mishandling of the economy by the subsequent Qarase government.

Chaudhry repeatedly refused to discuss publicly the issue of leadership, in a manner reminiscent of his pre-1999 poll strategy. Back then, he had reportedly suggested to Dr Tupeni Baba that he would be the first choice for prime minister in the event of a Labour victory, while coalition ally Adi Kuini Speed had also entertained ambitions for the top position.³ However, when the party obtained 37 seats in its own right, it seemed only fair, argued Chaudhry, that the FLP leader become prime minister. Yet, Chaudhry's assumption of the prime ministership back in 1999, the first ever Indian to assume the position, did not go down well with indigenous Fijians, many of whom felt hoodwinked by the move. It was then that President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara came to Chaudhry's assistance, swearing him into office as well as seeking to placate Labour's unhappy People's Coalition allies. The initial storm blew over, but Fijian disquiet remained a source of both grievance and attempted political realignment during the period 1999–2000.

When George Speight seized control of parliament on 19 May 2000, Chaudhry's earlier assumption of the prime ministership and the associated affront to 'indigenous rights' featured centrally in the coup instigator's regular interviews on international radio and television.

Before the 2006 election, the issue of whether or not Fijians would accept Chaudhry's return as prime minister was as hot a topic as it had been at the 2001 polls. The idea that race should not be an issue in the campaign might have struck a positive chord amongst non-Fijian FLP supporters, but the issue of race remained much more controversial among the Fijian voters that Labour needed to win over. After all, even within FLP ranks, it had been indigenous Fijians who had been most likely to break away during Chaudhry's years as leader. Back in 2001, Dr Tupeni Baba's New Labour Unity Party (NLUP) had been a splinter party that drew support primarily from among the already small band of Fijian FLP candidates. After their departure, the FLP became even more solidly Indian in complexion. Prior to the 2006 election, some Fijian voters saw Chaudhry's efforts to steer clear of the leadership issue as evasive and suspicious, reflecting his inability to read accurately the mood of a section of the community that he desperately needed to win over.

The FLP strategy reflected the benefit of strategic partnerships under Fiji's alternative vote system. On the other hand, the SDL tactic of seeking 'Fijian unity' seemed misguided because, with victories in marginal constituencies relying on transfers of preference votes from like-minded allies, the best tactic for big parties is usually not to seek to merge with smaller parties, but for the parties to field separate candidates and give each other strong preferences. This was the strategy that gave the FLP an absolute majority back in 1999, and it was the strategy attempted again in 2006. At the intervening election, in 2001, it had not worked. Back then, a group of 'Moderates Forum' parties – including the NLUP, led by Dr Tupeni Baba, the former Deputy Prime Minister in the People's Coalition government – had emerged; this group was bitterly opposed to Chaudhry's leadership and blamed the FLP leader for exacerbating tensions in the run-up to the 2000 coup. Moderates Forum preferences favoured the SDL above the FLP, leaving Chaudhry's party able to capture only the 19 Indian communal seats and nine of the open seats in the FLP's cane belt heartlands of western Viti Levu and northern Vanua Levu.

In 2006, the FLP was determined not to repeat the 2001 experience of being left without substantial coalition partners. These were required for two reasons. Victories in the more marginal open constituencies required the FLP either to (i) obtain sufficient preference votes to win in its own right, or (ii) assist like-minded allied parties to win and then enter into coalition with them. This was what drove the FLP to enter into a pre-election coalition with the western Viti Levu-based Party of National Unity (PANU) and Mick Beddoes' United Peoples Party (UPP).⁴

Labour was unable to secure a similar arrangement with the new Alliance Party (NAP) led by Ratu Epeli Ganilau. Ratu Epeli, a former army commander and chair of the Great Council of Chiefs, adopted a 'multiracial' platform for his newly formed NAP, which seemed, in many respects, more suited to a coalition with the FLP than with the SDL. Aimed at resurrecting the earlier Alliance Party – which had been forged in the mid-1960s and been the dominant force in Fiji politics over the period 1966 to 1987 – Ratu Epeli's advertising campaign paid homage to the stabilizing influence of Fiji's key post-war traditional chiefs, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. That the NAP remained formally neutral was indicative of their fear of the political consequences of too close an association with Mahendra Chaudhry – an association that would have limited the party's chances of winning Fijian support. This was a setback for Labour. Nevertheless, with some exceptions, the NAP preferences favoured the FLP, and enabled the party to win several of the highly marginal seats in the Suva–Nausori corridor.

Amongst the 13 parties that registered with the office of the Supervisor of Elections to contest the May 2006 general election was the rejuvenated PANU. PANU had been an important pillar of the FLP victory back in 1999, when its transferred preference votes gave the FLP four open seats. It had won another four Fijian communal seats in its own right. Chaudhry's close ally, Ba chief Ratu Sairusi Nagagavoka, was the party president, and two western PANU MPs, Meli Bogileka and Ponipate Lesavua, had joined the 1999–2000 People's Coalition cabinet. This episode caused some internal consternation. After his defeat at the 1999 poll, PANU General Secretary Apisai Tora broke away to join a rejuvenated *taukeyi* movement. He was among those who on 19 May 2000, aiming to create an atmosphere of destabilization, led the *taukeyi* march

through Suva's streets while George Speight and his followers stormed Fiji's parliament. PANU had fared poorly in 2001, largely because Apisai Tora had forged a rival western Viti Levu party, the Bai Kei Viti, which split the Fijian vote and allowed the SDL to take the western Fijian communal seats. But, prior to the 2006 polls, Apisai Tora retired and his Bai Kei Viti party vanished with him. On the other hand, under the auspices of Ratu Sairusi, PANU reformed and contested all western Fijian communal seats, giving the FLP its second preferences. Together with the UPP and PANU, the FLP hoped to capture a larger number of the all-important 25 open constituencies.

Labour also hoped to translate the stand-off between the SDL government and the Fiji military forces into more votes for the party. Over the years of Qarase's 2001–2006 government, army commander Frank Bainimarama had skirmished repeatedly with the Home Affairs Ministry, and even threatened to seize control of the government. In particular, the commander was vehemently opposed to the RTU Bill, the amnesty clause of which he saw as undermining the military's work in stabilizing the security situation in the wake of the 2000 coup. Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi interceded to calm relations between Qarase and the commander, but the military continued to insist on involvement during the election campaign, even on several occasions marching through the streets of Suva in a show of strength. This was all grist to Labour's mill. Party president Jokapeci Koroi, in an interview on Fiji TV, professed to support the commander's threat to seize office, and her statement was subsequently defended by Chaudhry.⁵ This was deeply ironic given the military's role in deposing the FLP government back in 1987. But Labour hoped that the military's newfound support for constitutionality and the rule of law would calm fears that a return to office of the FLP might precipitate another coup.

In the final stages of the campaign, Chaudhry sought to consolidate the FLP vote and dismissed the significance of smaller parties: the contest would, he argued, be a two-way tussle between his FLP and Qarase's SDL. In campaign meeting after campaign meeting, on sugar cane farm or in town hall, Chaudhry's message to voters was simple: 'the choice is not between 13 parties, but only two. If you aren't voting for Labour, then you are actually supporting SDL.'⁶ When Qarase and his party fought back by pushing the leadership issue onto the election agenda, asserting that Fiji was not ready for a non-indigenous prime

minister, Chaudhry again took the moral high ground and refused to descend to the 'gutter' of the SDL's racial politics, insisting on the FLP's intention to stick to the bread and butter issues that mattered most to the electorate.⁷

Two factors were critical in explaining the FLP's defeat in 2006. First, its pre-election partners, the UPP and PANU, did not perform as strongly as their counterparts in the People's Coalition of 1999. Beddoes' attempts to swing the general voters behind his UPP were partially successful in that the party managed to secure a second seat in parliament. Bernadette Rounds Ganilau won the Suva General Communal seat, pushing Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck into third place. The SDL candidate came second. Yet Beddoes himself only narrowly won the Western/Central General Communal seat, and the North Eastern General Communal seat fell to an independent, Robin Irwin, on the fifth count. The UPP candidate in that constituency obtained only 14.5 per cent of the vote. A West Country Liberal, originally from the United Kingdom, Irwin was vigorously opposed to Chaudhry's 'socialist' philosophy, and made it immediately clear that he could in no way be a Labour ally in the contest for the prime ministership. Although the SDL lost the only general communal seat it had gained in 2001, it is worth noting that it polled reasonably strongly in two of the three general constituencies, although less well in Suva City.

PANU also performed poorly, proving a faint shadow of its 1999 counterpart. The party had lost the all-important support of the Ba Provincial Council in 2005. Despite no longer having the Bai Kei Viti to contend with, it polled poorly in the west. Ponipate Lesavua managed 31.6 per cent of the vote in Ba East, but the SDL obtained over 60 per cent and thus took the seat on the first count.⁸ Yasawa politician Meli Bogileka fared still worse. He obtained only 7.7 per cent of the vote in Ba West, barely denting the SDL's ability to secure its nationwide average of 80 per cent of Fijian votes in this part of the country.

Secondly, Chaudhry and Beddoes under-estimated the popularity of the SDL, and did not anticipate its strong performance in traditionally UPP and PANU domains in western Fiji.

The predicted splitting of Fijian votes arising from the emergence of many Fijian-dominated parties and independent candidates did not happen. All 23 Fijian communal seats went to Qarase's SDL, while Labour obtained all 19 Indian communal seats. Two of the 12 open seats obtained by the FLP had

majority Fijian electorates (Nadroga and Samabula/Tamavua), but these were secured as a result of vote preferences from minority parties like the NAP and the National Federation Party. Much to Chaudhry's displeasure, Fijian voters were not attracted by Labour's painstaking effort to field more Fijian candidates. Nor did the decision to appoint several indigenous politicians – such as retired medical nurse Jokapeci Koroi and former ambassador and public service administrator Poseci Bune – to the party's top decision-making bodies noticeably boost the party's Fijian support.

The defeat of the FLP in 2006 was not solely a result of the weakness of their allies, or the unexpected strength of their opponents. There were also difficulties within the party; these exploded into the public domain after the election. In his years as party leader, Chaudhry had developed what many people, rightly or wrongly, took to be a tendency to surround himself with 'yes-men' – men generally not as well educated as their leader and definitely not as articulate when speaking English. After emerging victorious in the 1999 general election, Chaudhry, for this reason, found it hard to appoint competent ministers from his own party. Given the high number of Indian graduates and young professionals in Fiji today, Labour should have been able to choose from a huge reservoir of talent. Yet, the party has not proved very successful in attracting the new generation of younger professionals. By contrast, Qarase's SDL was able to select his ministers from a good mixture of young and matured professionals – qualified accountants, economists, technocrats, lawyers and academics.

Although Chaudhry's leadership style is often an issue of contention in Fiji, he never makes any concessions on this score. When asked by reporters whether he would re-consider his style in line with requests from the party 'dissidents', Chaudhry's standard refrain is to remark that voters have decided on his leadership by voting him back into office at the May 2006 poll.⁹ This may be true as regards his Ba Open constituency, but not for the country as a whole. National leadership differs from that required to represent specific interest groups, trade unions or farmers' organizations.

In the wake of the poll, the speed with which Qarase moved to conform with the country's constitution and formed a multiparty cabinet left little room for Chaudhry to reveal publicly his distress at leading his party to another election loss. He did not follow normal protocol by conceding to or congratulating

Qarase. When confronted by a reporter about this on the day the Prime Minister took his oath of office and invited Labour into his cabinet, Chaudhry said he did not see the need to do so.¹⁰ Writing a day or so after the elections results were declared, and after President Ratu Josefa Iloilo had sworn Qarase back into office, former *Fiji Sun* journalist Victor Lal called on the FLP leader to abide by Westminster conventions and tender his resignation for failing yet again to lead his party into an election victory.¹¹ Chaudhry did not react to Lal's public challenge. Close aides confirmed the party leader's disappointment about Labour's poor showing amongst the Fijian voters, a trend which some Labour members blamed on the party's Fijian coalition partner PANU. No longer could the party respond quite so easily to the experience of defeat, as it had done in 2001, with allegations of electoral fraud and with outrage over the illegitimate and unconstitutional process of cabinet formation.

If he wants to lead Labour into victory in the next general election, Chaudhry will have to come up with a new strategy that will enable Labour to maintain its Indian support while at the same time considerably strengthening its Fijian backing. Whatever that strategy turns out to be, Chaudhry will have to convince Fijian voters that in his determination to push the interests of his Indian supporters, he is not working against the indigenous community. For instance, fighting for the retention of ALTA offers (largely Indian) tenants the hope of security of tenure, but Fijian voters may want to see an increase in land rentals. However the Indian leader approaches the matter, history shows that Chaudhry is not, or is no longer, eager to jump into a coalition with a major indigenous political party. He witnessed the negative impact of such a manoeuvre after the 1992 election, when his minority Labour Party unexpectedly found itself holding the balance of power. Then, whoever it supported in the SVT party, which had secured the majority, would become prime minister: Ratu Mara's endorsed candidate, the late Josevata Kamikamica, or the charismatic Sitiveni Rabuka. Through deals that Chaudhry claimed Rabuka later reneged on, the trade unionist rallied behind the former coup leader, an action which came to haunt the Labour Party when, after the collapse of Rabuka's government two years later, Chaudhry and Labour found their vote slumping as the party was punished by an unforgiving Indian electorate.

Chaudhry had learned that lesson when the country prepared to go to the polls in 1999. This time, it was the NFP, the majority Indian party in parliament at the time, that brokered inauspicious alliances. Chaudhry's nemesis, Reddy, then the NFP opposition leader, ignored Labour's experience at the 1994 polls and decided to form a pre-election coalition with Rabuka's SVT. The two had earlier cooperated in a joint parliamentary select committee to produce the 1997 constitution. In the lead-up to the polls, Reddy agreed to become deputy to Rabuka in the event the coalition won. Rabuka's SVT was relegated to the opposition and the NFP suffered its worst-ever defeat in the polls – a defeat which, sadly, led to the premature exit from domestic politics of Reddy. The Indian electorate punished the NFP leader and his party for 'sleeping with the enemy'; the NFP did not win a single seat. It was to prove a long sojourn in the political wilderness for the NFP, with only its support in the municipal councils, amongst the older generation of sugar cane farmers and in some of the trade unions keeping the party alive. The NFP was again to find itself without seats after both the 2001 and 2006 elections. In the minds of Indian voters, the man who denied their party the right to govern the island nation when he led soldiers of the Fiji military forces into parliament on 14 May 1987 to stage a coup d'état and remove the late Dr Timoci Bavadra as prime minister should remain forever a foe, not a friend.

Owing to the 1999 annihilation of the NFP, Chaudhry was able to monopolize the Indian communal electorates and, with his majority bolstered by the support of minorities like the late Adi Kuini Speed's Fijian Association and Bune's Veitokani ni Lewenivanua Vakarisito (VLV) party, he was sworn into office as Fiji's fourth prime minister. It was to prove a short-lived administration. Precisely a year later, in May 2000, George Speight and a group of nationalists, with backing from renegade soldiers, seized parliament and took Chaudhry and members of his government hostage for 56 days.

Chaudhry's years of struggle had hardened his resolve. He looked back on his time as general secretary of the Public Servants Association that took on the might of the Alliance government with their austere financial measures – including wage freezes – in the early 1980s, and on his survival of two parliamentary takeovers, first as Dr Bavadra's finance minister in 1987 and then as prime minister in 2000. As many who have mustered the courage to challenge

him only to seal their fate within the party will testify, the man is a strategist, a political animal and as much a fighter as he is a survivor. Serious allegations against Chaudhry's personal integrity have been made, some damaging – such as his alleged affair with a former journalist and the appointment of his son, Rajendra Chaudhry, as his private secretary in 2000. But, for the Indian community, these criticisms did not stick.

Former Labour stalwarts, like Dr Tupeni Baba and John Ali, report that picking a fight with 'Mahen' tends to be a daunting prospect for two reasons; firstly, because Chaudhry has overwhelming support amongst the grassroots supporters of the FLP, and, secondly, because he is a workaholic and as ruthless in internal leadership struggles as he is in battles against the Fijian government of the day. Fiji caught a glimpse of his tireless energy during the reign of the People's Coalition government in 1999–2000. As prime minister, Chaudhry kept for himself a cluster of critically important portfolios, including the crucial ministries of finance, public enterprise, sugar reform and information. He arrived at the office well before other staff in the morning and worked until late at night. Reporters had to get used to attending press conferences with the Prime Minister during weekends. This was a work routine that was hard to match even for younger members of his cabinet.

This industriousness is also reflected in the way Chaudhry worked to build on his support. In 2005, when Labour MPs walked out of the parliamentary chamber in protest against the tabling of the SDL's RTU Bill, the Labour leader was not in the house. He explained his absence to the Lower House the next day: 'I was attending the funeral of a well-known social worker in Ba', Chaudhry told parliament. The fact that the funeral took place in his own constituency was indicative of the FLP leader's retention of close links with his constituents. Whilst some of his members are content to remain within the cocktail circuit in town, Mahen would rather work in his office or visit the people in their homes and settlements.

Such diligence and grassroots support make any attempt to challenge Chaudhry's leadership seem like political suicide. Several Labour executives report that the dramatic 2006 post-election controversy between the 'gang of five' and Chaudhry was only the spilling into the public arena of a conflict that had been simmering within the party's management board for some time. 'Some

of us have been battling Mahen all this while', said one executive Labour party member. 'There are a lot more challenges that happen behind the scenes and this challenge to Mahen's decision-making is not new. The only new thing is that this challenge has spilt into the public domain.'¹²

Internal conflict over the decision to participate in the multiparty cabinet was initially concealed from the public gaze. Several party executives reported that Chaudhry was clearly opposed to the idea, but did not oppose participation when he realised that the majority of his MPs wanted to accept Qarase's invitation. Chaudhry's constant insistence, during the 2001–2006 government, that he supported the multiparty cabinet concept made it difficult for him to avoid sending nine of his members to join Qarase's government. But the claim that he had personally authorized and inspired participation is unconvincing; Labour's participation was never the sole prerogative of the party leader but a decision for the entire party caucus. The intervening events – an outspoken FLP attack on the Prime Minister's choice of portfolios for the nine FLP ministers, coupled with a sudden climbdown and unconditional acceptance of those portfolios – reinforces the view that Chaudhry accepted this new direction for the party only under some duress.

Nadroga FLP MP Lekh Ram Vayeshnoi confirmed that he was reluctant to take up a cabinet position. 'I only decided to accept the position when Mahen asked me to', Vayeshnoi said.¹³ A party executive later related that Vayeshnoi's performance in cabinet only confirmed the suspicion held by many party members that he was deliberately sent into Qarase's multiparty cabinet to do Chaudhry's bidding. Shortly after the formation of the new cabinet, Vayeshnoi's public denunciation in parliament of the government's affirmative action program triggered the debates directed toward establishing ground rules for the practical day-to-day working of the multiparty cabinet. When Labour's deputy leader Poseci Bune admonished his cabinet colleague Vayeshnoi for his parliamentary outburst on national television and asked Chaudhry to rein in the outspoken Nadroga MP, the Labour leader would hear nothing of the complaint.¹⁴ Instead, Chaudhry told reporters he stood by the remarks of his more junior party member.

Chaudhry has the numbers. Vayeshnoi is deputy to Chaudhry, who is both parliamentary leader and general secretary of the party's National Council, Labour's supreme body. It was in the council, where he holds strong support,

that Chaudhry wanted the case of his 'renegade' party executives to be heard and decided. On the management board, by contrast, the 'rebels' had five of the nine positions. At the last count, Labour's National Council comprises 42 members, including 18 branch representatives – most of whom, according to a party executive, are National Farmers Union (NFU) stalwarts. Chaudhry is general secretary of the NFU. Urban-based workers have 13 representatives in the council and there are two representatives each from women and youth members of Labour. Party executives like Koroi, Chaudhry, Vayeshnoi, Bune, Krishna Datt and Atu Bain are also members. Party MPs can attend National Council meetings but have no voting rights.

With the numbers stacked against Bune and his allies, Chaudhry had two clear options; sack the dissidents and throw them out of Labour, or take out the olive branch and instigate reconciliation. At the time of writing, the outcome of that potential split within the FLP is unclear. Chaudhry may even decide to take up the unsolicited advice of Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, who, on the eve of Labour's first council meeting, held in a Nadi school in early June 2006, urged the Labour leader to reconcile with internal and external foes. 'Mr Chaudhry is in a strategic position to destroy the multiparty government', Ratu Joni told a meeting of the Fiji Institute of Accountants:

This can be done by way of an ultimatum from the FLP to its members of parliament who are in cabinet. Alternatively, it will be a gradual erosion of cabinet cohesion by a series of sustained attacks on the government. The consequences will be serious for all of us. There will be recriminations and blame cast on all sides. They usually assume an ethnic hue in very short order. The resulting distrust will merely entrench the nay-sayers on all sides. So there are high stakes and failure has to be the last option available.¹⁵

On national television, a day after Ratu Joni's public address, Chaudhry appeared taken aback by these precise and candid remarks, telling journalists that he couldn't understand what moved Fiji's second citizen to make the comments that he did.¹⁶

The day after Qarase had invited Labour to help form a multiparty government, Chaudhry singled out a word that the Prime Minister constantly used in their discussions: that it was his 'prerogative' as prime minister to decide which Labour MP would be in his cabinet line-up. Interestingly, Chaudhry

used the same word when he defended his decision to finalize his list of eight senators, saying that it was his ‘prerogative’ as leader of the Fiji Labour Party to compile the senate list. Prerogatives are natural, sovereign or god-given rights, theoretically subject to no restriction.¹⁷ They are exercised unilaterally, without consultation. As such, they are foreign to power-sharing arrangements, such as those Fiji chose for itself in 1997, which built flexibility, negotiation and consensus into political relationships. Fiji has had more than its fair share of prerogatives, exercised by communally based politicians. Perhaps now, in the wake of the 2006 elections, is a good time not so much for unilateral take-it-or-leave-it decision-making, but for a new style of politics based on greater give and take by both sides.

Notes

- ¹ The polls were conducted by Tebbutt Research, a private company based in Fiji, for *The Fiji Times*.
- ² ‘House of Representatives By-Elections – 2004 – Returning Officers Report’, *Fiji Government Gazette*, 4(11), 6 February 2004.
- ³ See Field, M., Baba, T., & Nabobo-Baba, U. 2005. *A Speight of Violence, Inside Fiji’s 2000 Coup*. Reed Publishing, where, pp.48–53; Keith-Reid, R. 1999. ‘Chaudhry: the man in the hot seat’, *Fiji Islands Business*, June.
- ⁴ Beddoes had formerly been a loyal backer of long-serving Fijian Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara (1970–1987). His United Generals’ Party had entered a coalition with Rabuka in 1999, and was part of the ‘Moderates Forum’ that gave its preference votes to the SDL rather than to the FLP at the 2001 election. It fared poorly at the 2001 polls, with Beddoes himself becoming the party’s sole member in parliament. Prior to the 2006 election, Beddoes realigned the party with the FLP, ending a long association between general-voter-based parties and the mainstream Fijian leadership (see Yellow Bucket, ‘The “Generals” – where to now?’, this volume).
- ⁵ ‘Chaudhry defends Military Chief’s Actions’, *The Fiji Times*, 17 January 2006.
- ⁶ FLP rally in the Suva Civic Centre covered by Sunayna Nandni, journalism student, USP.
- ⁷ Radio debate, VitiFM, 3 May 2006.
- ⁸ To appreciate just how poorly PANU performed, it is worth noting that the party received more votes from above-the-line first preference transfers from the FLP (1,565) than it obtained directly (1,264 above-the-line plus 59 below-the-line). (Data obtained from Master Tally Collection Sheet 0-39, Ba East Fijian, provided by Fiji Elections Office.) This outcome is invisible in the normally published results, which only show the totals obtained by each party at each stage of the count (in this case 2,888). In Fiji’s elaborate voting system, parties are able to lodge preferences even where they do not stand candidates. These candidate-less party preference lists must place another party, with a candidate standing, as first preference. In this case, FLP first preference votes were directly transferred to PANU.

- ⁹ *The Fiji Times*, 8 July 2006, p.7.
- ¹⁰ Press Conference, Fiji Teachers Union conference room, 18 May 2006.
- ¹¹ *Fiji Sun*, 23 May 2006.
- ¹² Anonymous, personal communication to author by a Labour executive, 17 July 2006.
- ¹³ Personal communication to author for *Islands Business* cover story, June 2006.
- ¹⁴ FijiOne News, 15 June 2006.
- ¹⁵ Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, Keynote address, Fiji Institute of Accountants Congress, Sheraton Fiji Resort, 23 June 2006.
- ¹⁶ FijiOne News, 24 June 2006.
- ¹⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1956 edition.