

# 9

## The failure of the moderates

### The Yellow Bucket Team<sup>1</sup>

In the lead-up to the 2006 election, certain sections of Suva society and the media made much of the ‘moderates’ and the potential impact they would have at the polls. This was not a new phenomenon: exaggerated expectations of great gains for moderate parties were a feature of media reports and urban aspirations prior to the 2001 election. Similarly, prior to the 1999 election, many believed that the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei/National Federation Party/United General Party (SVT/NFP/UGP) coalition would fare well owing to its ‘moderate’ multiracial agenda. Each time, however, the ‘moderates’ have been rejected and not by a small margin.

First, let’s examine this term ‘moderate’ and what it really means within the context of Fiji. In western politics, occupying the political centre tends to be the key to victory, leading parties to compete vigorously for the middle ground. For observers familiar with such settings, it therefore seems illogical that the political centre of Fiji’s politics has proved such an electoral dead zone. The key difference is that the political wings of Fiji’s politics are dominated not by the more conventional economic and social ideologies but by race.

A close examination of the actual economic policies of both major parties will find a pragmatic mixture of philosophies that in the final analysis turn out to be very similar. So, for example, while the Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) is assumed to be more on the right wing of the political spectrum, it is very strong on the kind of affirmative action policies traditionally associated

with the left, while the FLP, despite portraying itself as worker-based and left of centre, vigorously promotes privatization.<sup>2</sup>

The reality of Fiji's politics is that you have a Fijian political right wing with, at its most extreme, aggressive nationalists who have in the past supported political figures like Sakeasi Butadroka and who were enthusiastic backers of the various coups and George Speight. At the extreme left, within the outer edges of the Indo-Fijian community, you will find figures with political views reminiscent of those expressed by Hindu nationalist politicians in India. Fueled by a fierce sense of grievance that finds its origin in the *girit* (indenture) period, these views are rarely expressed openly, but provide a significant undercurrent to Indo-Fijian politics. Fiji's ideological spectrum, therefore, stretches between these two extremes, with, in the centre, a small group of educated élite promoting the cause of multi-racialism in its purest form.

The vision of a multiracial country working together in harmony represents a commonly expressed utopia for many in Fiji. Whether it be in school oratory contests, public debates or letters to the editors columns, you will find this dream described over and over again. Why then does it represent a political tar pit – one into which numerous politicians have seen their futures sink without a trace?

Dig a little deeper and you find that multiracialism in Fiji is viewed as a positive concept, but only if practiced on each race's terms. For example, you will find the view often expressed by Fijian voters that they welcome Indo-Fijians and other races, but political power must remain in the hands of the Fijians. Similarly, Indo-Fijians will talk warmly about Fijian friends and neighbours, but at the same time privately express extreme distrust as to their competence in running the country. Hence, the Indo-Fijian argument runs, there is a need for an aggressive, strong leader who will keep them (the Fijians) honest.

Multi-racialism as a political policy is, therefore, a charade in Fiji. Plenty play at it but very few really practice it – and this is why the so-called moderates have found it so difficult to dislodge the large Fijian- and Indo-Fijian-based parties (at present the SDL and FLP, respectively). These two parties typify what has been a successful strategy since independence – dominate a racial wing and from that position move to the centre when appropriate. This strategy is particularly useful

as attitudes towards 'multiracialism on our terms' vary according to the political mood. In times of crisis, the support at the extremes hardens; during periods of calm and prosperity there is growth in the multiracial centre. It is, therefore, essential that a party have the flexibility to shift position to suit the prevailing mood. Getting it wrong, as the SVT and NFP found in 1999, is fatal.

This racial positioning is made all the more successful by Fiji's communal-based electoral system. With 23 Fijian communal seats and 19 Indo-Fijian seats, dominating one racial wing provides an essential political base. Moderate parties attempting to strike out from the centre have found this racial dominance of wings a huge barrier to achieving any form of electoral momentum.

The results of the 2006 election demonstrated this. While parties like the NFP and the new Alliance Party of Fiji (NAPF) tried to take a position in the centre, they were squeezed out by the FLP and the SDL, which both moved quite distinctly in their 2006 manifestos toward the multiracial centre. To quote the SDL manifesto:

The SDL has a very large tent. It is not only for indigenous Fijians. It has room for everyone. Its membership has always been multiracial. Increasingly, the party has received support from non-Fijians, and expects to win more of their votes in this election.<sup>3</sup>

Similar views were expressed by the FLP in their manifesto – and yet minimal cross-racial voting was recorded. If anything, such voting declined in the 2006 election.

While it was always going to be a challenge to find room in the multiracial center of Fijian politics, both the NFP and the NAPF added to their political woes by making a number of strategic blunders.

The NFP, Fiji's oldest political party, entered the election without the most basic of political requirements, a recognizable leader. After several attempts to find a leader, they fought the election under the nominal control of Raman Pratap Singh, but it was widely recognized that the party was in fact being run by a committee of leaders featuring people like trade unionists Attar Singh and Pramod Rae. They were the public face of the NFP and, along with a number of senior advisors, determined strategies, leaving their party president to campaign for his Vanua Levu seat. The result amongst voters was total confusion. Potential supporters had little idea as to who the real leader of the party was, and, up against a powerful figure like Mahendra Chaudhry, they

presented little competition. This confusion appeared an issue not only for voters; within the party itself there was considerable indecision over political direction and strategies to adopt.

In the lead-up to the election, the NFP viewed themselves as the king-makers. Recognizing that they would struggle to win a seat, they made much of holding the balance-of-power with what they hoped would be around 20 per cent of the Indian vote. With that kind of vote-share, NFP preferences would decide which of the two dominant parties would win power. Intense negotiations took place with both the SDL and the FLP about NFP preferences. While it was understood that the minor moderate parties would share early preferences, the real issue was whether the NFP would place SDL ahead of FLP or vice versa. It was assumed by many that ultimately the NFP would follow past practices and place the FLP last. In the SDL camp, Prime Minister Qarase handled negotiations personally, and, as the deadline for the filing of preferences approached, the SDL were confident they had NFP support – apparently in return for promises of Senate and, through the Senate, cabinet appointments. This, in the eyes of the SDL leadership, in addition to their own overwhelming Fijian support, would guarantee election victory for the SDL.

However, unexpectedly, the NFP ended up adopting a mixed approach to their preferences – switching the order of the FLP and SDL according to criteria based on the individual candidate in each seat, on the promotion of women candidates, and on making sure sugar-cane belt seats remained represented by an Indian party. This decision turned what the SDL thought would be a minimum 42-seat victory into a very tight election race.

At the same time, it won the NFP no favours from their bitter rivals, the FLP, who continued their very successful strategy from the past two elections of accusing the NFP of selling out to the SDL. This was ironic because a key factor in the NFP's decision to split preferences was to avoid just this accusation, but in taking this path they were caught in a classic no-win situation. The only way to avoid accusations of a racial sell-out by their opponents would have been to offer blanket support for the FLP, but this would have made participating in the election a rather pointless exercise.

In all this indecision, the NFP surrendered a politically advantageous position that appeared to be finally gaining some ground – that of being the Indo-Fijian

party that could work with the Fijian community for the betterment of all. This position called for the abandonment of the past confrontational politics of the FLP (portrayed by some as ‘boycott or high court’). While it didn’t appear that this would enable the NFP to oust the FLP, it was at least a coherent and clear stand around which the NFP could have built a campaign.

It is hard to understand just what the NFP hoped to achieve with its approach to preferences. In addition to fears of an Indo-Fijian backlash, it could have been that the NFP feared giving all their preferences to the SDL and thereby delivering to them a two-thirds majority and the associated power to change the constitution. Whatever the logic, the reality was that the NFP destroyed whatever political influence they could have hoped to have had and denied themselves alliances with either of the two powerhouses, the SDL and the FLP.

In addition, along with their moderate counterparts – the NAF, who adopted a similar strategy – they confused the electorate. With over 90 per cent of the electorate voting ‘above-the-line’ along party lines, the split preference approach left many unsure as to where their votes might eventually end up. Both the FLP and, particularly, the SDL exploited this situation. The SDL took out newspaper advertisements warning Fijian voters not to take the risk and instead to ‘tick the dove [the symbol of the SDL] above the line’. This proved very effective and Fijian voters, already nervous about a repeat of 2000, decided to stick with what they knew and vote with either of the two major parties. Similarly, Indo-Fijian voters were reminded in election gatherings by the FLP not to take the risk of being sold out to the SDL.

The NFP’s woes were shared by the ‘new kids’ on the political scene, the NAF. The NAF was created following the ousting of Ratu Epeli Ganilau as the chairman of the Bose Levu Vakaturaga (Great Council of Chiefs). In this role, he had impressed many educated urban observers with the innovative manner by which he attempted to transform this very traditional and previously rather ineffective body into one more relevant to the challenges facing the Fijian people of today. In the process he almost inevitably entered into conflict with the more conservative elements of the *vanua* and with the SDL government.

Much was expected of the NAPF, particularly within the Suva-based liberal elite, but Ratu Epeli never appeared very comfortable as a politician. He struggled to build a solid political base and relied heavily on the 'leftovers' of Fijian politics to stand as candidates. Many of these aging figures had previously been members of the SVT and the Fijian Association. It gave the party a very stale feel, when it desperately needed a younger, more dynamic image.<sup>4</sup>

To make this worse, the NAPF decided to link Ratu Epeli with the chiefly legacy of his father, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, and a long line of respected chiefs, including former president Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and earlier post-war leader Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. The images of these figures of history featured prominently on NAPF advertising, reinforcing the very old feel of the party. The decision to try and give the party a chiefly image was a dangerous strategy. While it may have appealed to some within the General Voter category, to the critical Fijian electorate it did not relate to the Fiji of 2006 – and may even have appeared a little presumptuous.

The disastrous performance of the moderates speaks for itself. The NFP's share of Indo-Fijian votes dropped from 22.1 per cent to 14.4 per cent and, while they achieved a small increase in Fijian votes, this only amounted to 1.3 per cent. Altogether, the NFP won just 6.3 per cent of the total vote. The NAPF won 2.5 per cent of Fijian communal votes, 1.7 per cent of Indo-Fijian votes and, not surprisingly, 7.6 per cent of General votes. Together, however, this represented a mere 4 per cent of the total vote.

Despite brave words in the wake of the election, it is difficult to see how either of these parties will survive their crushing defeats. Tradition, and NFP's base in municipal councils and within a faction of the trade union movement, may sustain the NFP, but it is hard to see how they will achieve any level of national influence without a charismatic leader and a fundamental change in Indo-Fijian politics. The most likely fate of the NAPF is to follow parties like the Fijian Association, the VLV and SVT and slide away into obscurity, perhaps to re-emerge in another form in 2011.

What of the moderate multiracial political agenda? It is very hard in this current political environment to see an opportunity for a moderate party to emerge from the centre.

Continued political and economic stability will see both the SDL and FLP move more and more towards the middle ground of Fijian politics. This is already evident in the early days of the Qarase-led multiparty cabinet – and the longer this lasts the more attractive moderate multiracial policies will become to voters. However, this shift will come at the initiative of the two giants of Fiji politics, and most definitely on their terms.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The 'Yellow Bucket' is a weekly column on Fiji politics and national affairs that can be found at <[www.fijivillage.com](http://www.fijivillage.com)>. Inspiration for the column is found, like many things in Fiji, around a yellow bucket of *yagona* or kava – hence the name. Launched early in 2003, it has gained a reputation for providing astute observation of Fiji politics and its forecasts have proved remarkably accurate in recent years. Authorship of the column is credited to an editorial board that gathers regularly around a yellow bucket.
- <sup>2</sup> Mahendra Chaudhry made such remarks on 'The Real Deal' talkback show, VitiFM/Radio Sargam, 3 May 2006; see also the references to 'public private partnerships to "weed out corrupt practices" in state owned industries' in the 2006 FLP Manifesto, 2006, <[http://www.flp.org.fj/Fiji\\_Labour\\_Manifesto-final\[2\].pdf](http://www.flp.org.fj/Fiji_Labour_Manifesto-final[2].pdf)> (accessed 29 July 2006).
- <sup>3</sup> SDL 2006 Manifesto, p.8, <<http://www.sdlparty.com.fj/SDLManEngSum.pdf>> (accessed 29 July 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> Ratu Epeli even said that the party would finalize its list of candidates once the major parties had completed their pre-selection, so that the NAPF could pick up rejected candidates from the other parties. Certainly, beyond Ratu Epeli and one or two other figures the NAPF looked like a party of rejects.