

# Bose ni Vanua<sup>1</sup> and democratic politics in Rewa

Baro Saumaki

The most intense intra-Fijian struggle of the 2006 election occurred in Rewa, historically a dissident province in Fiji's highly diversified political firmament. The contest was between independent candidate Ro Filipe Tuisawau and his aunt, Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) Education Minister Ro Teimumu Kepa. This was potentially a contest that defied party lines and threatened outcomes that diverged from broader national trends. The history of chiefly leadership in the province was important: following the death of Ro Lady Lala Mara, the wife of former president Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, her sister, Ro Teimumu Kepa, had succeeded to the highest title in Rewa. That succession had been contested by Ro Filipe Tuisawau, whose father had previously been a challenger for the Roko Tui Dreketi title. The 2006 electoral contest, between the same two contestants, was initially one for the SDL nomination. After losing that, Ro Filipe stood as an independent, and was widely expected to do well within Rewa. Yet, Ro Teimumu easily won, Ro Filipe pulling up well short of the share of the vote required to force a second count – an outcome that showed just how strong party loyalties were at the 2006 election.

The Rewa contest provides an intriguing study of how traditional Fijian leadership is shaping in the 21st century. Rewa people are debating the importance of chiefs and the legitimacy of current chiefly political practice. This case study focuses on the two main issues at the forefront of Fijian leadership today: the duality of traditional and democratic leadership, and

the ethical challenges of public leadership that appear to take advantage of traditional means to satisfy democratic ends. In Fiji, there exists a duality of values, a duality of laws and a duality of leadership authority. Traditional values, modes of authority, and custom law exist alongside democratic values, modern legal law and political authority. Fijians recognize their chief as the person who occupies the traditional leadership office; however, they cannot easily and appropriately blend traditional systems of authority with the democratic system. Nayacakalou argued that ‘...a traditional Fijian leader as distinct from various types of modern leaders is the person who occupies the customary office of chief of the group and thus the chief’s jurisdiction covers all matters *‘vakavanua’* (matters of the land) and he has a definite right to make decision on behalf of the group’.<sup>2</sup>

Owing to Tongan intervention, Rewa lost the protracted pre-cession wars that ended in Bau chief Ratu Seru Cakobau assuming ascendancy over the Fiji islands. With a land area of just 272 square kilometres (the smallest of Fiji’s provinces), the province of Rewa includes the capital city of Suva and is made up of two parts – one including part of Suva’s hinterland to the west, and the other a non-contiguous area to the east, separated from the rest of Rewa by Naitasiri Province. At the 1996 census, the province (including Suva) had a population of 101,547, making it Fiji’s third most populous province. Without Suva City proper, as indicated by the data shown in Table 16.1, the population is 11,634, of which slightly over 36 per cent live in the core Rewa River delta *tikinas*, 32.8 per cent in Fijian villages linked to Rewa within Suva City, a little under 20 per cent in the territory known as ‘Rewa’ *tikina* to the west of Suva and 10.6 per cent on Beqa (in the *tikinas* of Sawau and Raviravi).<sup>3</sup>

Map 16.1 shows the Rewa Fiji Provincial Communal constituency, which excludes those areas of Rewa Province that are covered by Suva’s urban constituencies (although the wider provincial boundary, is also shown by the dotted line). Some villages within Suva are, for administrative purposes, counted as part of Rewa Province and entitled to vote on the Rewa Fijian communal roll. Both Ro Teimumu and Ro Filipe, for example, campaigned in the four villages of Navukavu (Waiqanake) and in other villages along the highway from Lami westwards, although these are officially part of the South West Fiji Urban Communal constituency. Rewa ballot boxes were also present at many

polling stations throughout the capital city. The ‘Rewa connection’ of many of the villages shown as part of Rewa *tikina* to Suva’s west is a post-cession administrative innovation. Pre-cession, some of these villages were more closely linked with Naitasiri Province.<sup>4</sup>

For both socioeconomic and traditional reasons, Rewa is a powerful province. It is not only the hinterland of the national capital, but also the heart of the Burebasaga, one of three traditional chiefly confederacies. In population terms, Burebasaga is the largest of the confederacies represented at Fiji’s Great Council of Chiefs.<sup>5</sup> It covers the southeastern part of the island of Viti Levu, stretching around the south coast to the extreme west of Viti Levu. It consists of the provinces of Rewa, Nadroga, Namosi, Serua, Beqa and Kadavu Island off the coast of Suva, and parts of Ba. At the zenith of its power, in 1817, Rewa’s territories extended through the river tribal areas as far inland as Naitasiri, 40 miles from the mouth of the river.<sup>6</sup> Lomanikoro (in Rewa *tikina*) is the capital of this confederacy. The Roko Tui Dreketi is the paramount chief of the province and of the Burebasaga Confederacy. This title is considered to be the second most senior to Bau in Fiji’s House of Chiefs. The dynasty holding the title is

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**Table 16.1 Selected features of Rewa Province, 2004–2005**

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<i>Tikina</i>	Population	Households	Land area (acres)
Rewa	2,429	453	3,130
Noco	1,409	296	2,129
Burebasaga	617	132	1,173
Vutia	344	80	739
Toga	946	183	3,318
Dreketi	848	185	1,316
Suva	3,812	645	32,787
Sawau	636	153	4,466
Raviravi	593	147	4,344
Total	11,634	2,274	53,405

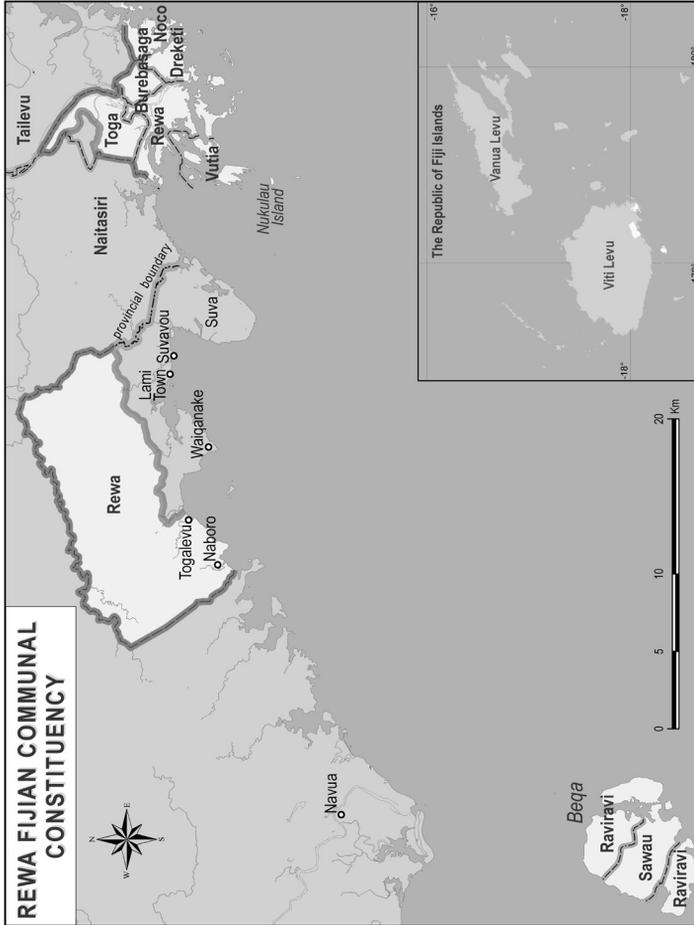
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Note: This table shows the results of a survey conducted by the Rewa Provincial Council during 2004–5. The population figures do not include those away from their villages at the time of the survey.

Source: Rewa Province website, [www.rewapc.com/prov\\_profile.aspx](http://www.rewapc.com/prov_profile.aspx)

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Map 16.1 The *Tikina Makawa* of Rewa Fijian Communal



Source: Pacific Institute of Advanced Studies in Development and Governance (PIAS-DG) Mapping Database, University of the South Pacific, Suva.

the Tuisawau family. Unlike some chiefly titles in other parts of the Fiji group, this one is not reserved for males. The present Roko Tui Dreketi is, as previously mentioned, a woman: Ro Teimumu Vuikaba Tuisawau-Kepa, who was also the Minister for Education in the 2001–2006 Qarase government.<sup>7</sup>

Rewa is governed by a provincial council.<sup>8</sup> The position of chair of the council was vacant at the time of the 2006 poll, and the council had decided not to fill it until the constitution was changed to allow parliamentarians to hold national and provincial office simultaneously: this would allow their paramount chief, Ro Teimumu Kepa, to assume the position. In the interim, Pita Tagicakiverata from Vutia, was the acting chairman.

Historically in Rewa, the democratic process through the ballot box has indirectly been used as a means of bolstering the traditional legitimation of authority. This continued to be the case in 2006, when the two prominent chiefs from the ruling chiefly household both vied for endorsement as the SDL candidate. Ro Filipe was a popular choice because of his previous involvement with the people as a former president of the provincial rugby union. Ro Teimumu's decision to stand was based on the claim that traditional stature should also acquire a political expression by way of a ministerial portfolio. She argued that 'if you're not in Cabinet even if you're not in the house of reps there's no assistance in Rewa, I cannot see any other way we will be able to help our province'.<sup>9</sup>

Before the primary election, SDL received two petitions from the *vanua* representatives supporting Ro Filipe. SDL officials advised Ro Filipe not to stand, but to await the following election. They were worried that Ro Teimumu might be defeated in the primary election. Ro Teimumu's supporters argued that leaders of the various traditional houses (*liuliu ni veibure vakaturaga*) in Rewa were effectively the SDL branch representatives, and were the rightful people to cast votes in the primary election rather than the ordinary leaders in the villages.<sup>10</sup> On the day of the primary election, the *vanua* of Rewa held a meeting in Lomanikoro. During the meeting, despite a motion from the Vunivalu, Ro Jone Mataitini, urging the meeting not to discuss any political issues, the Roko Tui Dreketi's spokesperson told *tikina* representatives that Ro Teimumu would be their representative.<sup>11</sup> The move to consolidate support behind Ro Teimumu was obviously backed by the SDL campaign team, which

emphasized that 'A vote for Ro Teimumu is a vote for the Vanua of Burebasaga', and that the SDL would not endorse any second party or shadow independent candidates. Voters were to be urged to tick 'the dove above the line'; by doing so they would endorse the party's preferred candidate, Ro Teimumu.<sup>12</sup>

Ro Filipe Tuisawau demurred and, to reinforce his case, initiated a debate that provides some insight into the nature of political institutions in the province. He argued that 'the vanua and the chiefly system has been used many times to manipulate Fijians for political gain and this has confused them into not accepting democratic values'.<sup>13</sup> This comment followed Ro Teimumu's call for the 'Bose ni Vanua', a meeting reserved only for traditional purposes, to discuss pre-selection of the province's candidate for parliament. Ro Filipe suggested that democratic party politics should be based only on the choices exercised by individual voters, and that the Bose ni Vanua was a meeting only for the hereditary chiefs. Ro Filipe argued:

...the two essentially are in conflict and when you hold a meeting to discuss political issues, you are undermining the integrity of the Bose ni Vanua, because they make the decision but then the people will have an individual vote later which might contradict the decision they make. It undermines the whole basis of the Bose ni Vanua, and really they shouldn't be discussing political issues.<sup>14</sup>

To probe more deeply into the background of this pre-election dispute, we need to revisit the earlier, succession-related differences that emerged between provincial factions following the passing away of the late Roko Tui Dreketi, Ro Lady Lala Mara, in July 2004. For many people in Rewa, the ballot box was another way of resolving customary contests for chiefly leadership.

There is an age-old succession struggle within the Tuisawau clan, the current holders of the Roko Tui Dreketi title. In the previous generation, it was between Ro Lady Lala Mara (1931–2004) and her half brother, Ro Mosese Tuisawau (1926–2000). With their passing, the saga appears to be continuing between Ro Teimumu and her nephew, Ro Filipe Tuisawau (Ro Mosese's son). The origins of the dispute involved questions about the legitimate inheritance of the title. Ro George Tuisawau had four children, the oldest, Ro Aporosa Rageci Tuisawau, Ro Mosese, Ro Lala and the youngest, Ro Teimumu. Ro Lala and Ro Teimumu's mother, Adi Asenaca Vosailagi, was from the chiefly Ka Levu clan of Nadroga.<sup>15</sup> Ro Lala's marriage, on 9 September 1950, to Ratu Mara was

considered a dynastic marriage, as it united two powerful feudal families. Ratu Mara was later to become the Tui Lau and Tui Nayau (the traditional ruler of the Lau Islands), and Fiji's long-serving post-independence prime minister. Ro Lala inherited the title of Roko Tui Dreketi from her father.

The dispute between the ruling families of Rewa can be traced back to the 19th century. In 1821–22, dissension among the members of the ruling family – a result of the system of polygamy among the high chiefs and of intermarriage among the chiefly families – split Rewa into hostile factions.<sup>16</sup> Jealousies and intrigue between the children of one father with different mothers led to intervention by interested kingdoms and, occasionally, to war. Derrick argued that the tale of the disintegration of the Roko Tui Dreketi family was intimately connected to the 19th century downfall of Rewa.<sup>17</sup> The fate of the Tuisawau dynasty (1936 – to the present) has echoed some of those earlier difficulties. While Ro George Tuisawau, who reigned for 25 years (1936–1961), was revered by the people of Rewa, Ro Lala was not as popular amongst her people. During the 2000 coup, for example, one account has suggested that Ro Lady Lala Mara's half-brother, Ro Mosese Tuisawau:

...rode the tide of popular opposition to the Mara dynasty, with the aim of having himself installed as Roko Tui Dreketi. Flyers circulated in and around Suva pointed to years of top-level chiefly appropriation of rent incomes derived from the Fijian Hotel, dredged up controversies about the relocation of the peoples of Suvavou (the traditional landowners of Suva) and made allegations about the spiriting away of port clearance fees and hurricane relief funds.<sup>18</sup>

Rewa province has produced some of Fiji's most influential political leaders, including Semesa Sikivou, Tomasi Vakatora, Berenado Vunibobo and Sakeasi Butadroka. Sikivou graduated from New Zealand's Auckland University, and went on to become the first Fijian to acquire a postgraduate degree from the London School of Economics. He served as a member of the Legislative Council in the 1960s, and in January 1963 was one of the eight who signed the Wakaya Letter, which affirmed the principles of Fijian paramountcy. When Fiji gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1970, he was appointed Fiji's first Ambassador to the United Nations, serving until 1976. He re-entered politics in the 1980s, and served as Minister for Foreign Affairs. Sikivou was offered a knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II, but declined it, saying that it was his honour to serve her without remuneration.

In the first post-independence election, Rewa became an Alliance Party stronghold, with Sakeasi Butadroka taking the then Rewa/Serua/Namosi Fijian Communal seat in 1972, with 91.2 per cent of the vote. Butadroka was a politician noted for his strident ethnic nationalism, but his first falling out with Alliance Prime Minister Ratu Mara had more to do with grievances about the government's failure to assist Fijian development (and, in particular, his Rewa Provincial Council Bus Company). Butadroka was expelled from the Alliance Party in 1973, after he assisted an opposing candidate in a by-election for the Suva East Fijian National seat.<sup>19</sup> In October 1975, he introduced a parliamentary motion calling for a resolution to repatriate Indians back to India, and for their travelling expenses and compensation for their properties in Fiji to be met by the British government. Butadroka founded the Fijian Nationalist Party, which took 25 per cent of the Fijian vote in the general election held in April 1977. Although the party won only one parliamentary seat, its votes were mostly at the expense of the Alliance. This allowed the opposition National Federation Party to win 26 seats to the Alliance's 24, precipitating a constitutional crisis. Rewa was where Butadroka's Nationalist Party received its strongest showing in the country.

Butadroka lost the September 1977 election, when he secured 40.2 per cent of the vote in comparison with new Alliance candidate Tomasi Vakatora's 59.8 per cent. Vakatora had trained as a teacher at Nasinu Teachers Training College and briefly attended Ruskin College, Oxford, and the London School of Economics. He became the Permanent Secretary and Commissioner of Labour in 1969, one of the very few locals to attain such distinction at that time. Prior to his retirement from the civil service, he was Permanent Secretary of Works and Tourism. After a brief stint in the Senate he unsuccessfully contested a seat in the House of Representatives as Alliance candidate for Rewa in April 1977. However, after success at the September poll, he served in a range of ministries before being appointed Speaker of the House from 1982–1987. In the wake of the coups, he served in Ratu Mara's interim administration, becoming Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Economic Development in 1992. Vakatora held the Rewa Communal seat from September 1977 until the elections in 1992, when Butadroka and Ro Mosese Tuisawau won the two Rewa seats (Vakatora did not stand). Vakatora's greatest achievement was as a

**Table 16.2** Election results for Rewa Fijian communal constituency, 1972–2001

Year	Winner	Party	Votes won	Total valid votes cast	Votes won/Total valid votes cast (per cent)
1972	Sakeasi Butadroka	Alliance	6,263	6,868	91.2
1977 (Apr)	Sakeasi Butadroka	Nationalist	4,640	8,684	53.4
1977 (Sept)	Tomasi R Vakatora	Alliance	5,231	8,743	59.8
1982	Tomasi R Vakatora	Alliance	7,492	11,164	63.3
1987	Tomasi R Vakatora	Alliance	6,002	10,826	55.4
1992	Ro Mosese Tuisawau	Nationalist	2,288	7,498	30.5
	Sakiasi Butadroka	Nationalist	2,269	7,498	30.3
1994	Berenado Vunibobo	SVT	1,955	7,122	27.5
	Atunaisa B Druavesi	SVT	1,790	7,122	25.1
1999	Timoci Q Silatolu	FAP	3,100	5,193	20.5
2001	Teimumu V Kepa	SDL	2,636	5,133	51.4

Notes: Results shown cover the Rewa/Serua/Namosi Fijian Communal seat from 1972–1987, the two-member Rewa Fijian provincial seat in 1992 and 1994, and the single member Rewa Fijian Communal seat in 1999 and 2001.

SVT = Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei; FAP = Fijian Association Party; SDL = Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua

member of the 1995–96 three-person Fiji Constitution Review Commission, headed by Sir Paul Reeves. Election results over the period 1972–2001 are shown in Table 16.2.

In the wake of the 1987 coup, a new (1990) constitution was promulgated; it gave Rewa two seats in parliament. Butadroka had been one of the leaders of the 1987 Taukei Movement, whose agitation formed the backdrop to the two military coups of 1987 that deposed the elected government and severed Fiji's ties to the British monarchy. Otherwise, however, he operated largely on the political fringes, although he secured one of the Rewa seats in 1992. He strongly opposed the adoption of the 1997 constitution, which reversed most of the provisions institutionalizing ethnic Fijian supremacy in the 1990 constitution. When parliament passed the new constitution, Butadroka publicly burned a copy. In 1999, he merged his party, now called the Nationalist United Front Party (NUFP), with Iliesa Duvuloco's Vanua Tako Lavo Party to form the Nationalist Vanua Tako Lavo Party. The party obtained one seat at the 1999 poll, although

Butadroka himself was not elected. The *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT) emerged as the dominant ethnic Fijian party of the early 1990s, and Berenado Vunibobo and Atunaisa Druavesi took the Rewa seats for this party in 1994. The switch in political allegiances from Nationalist to SVT between 1992 and 1994 was indicative of the long-run volatility of Rewa politics.

Nationalist sentiments brewed beneath the surface during the late 1990s. The Rewa seat was taken in 1999 by Ratu Timoci Silatolu, who was a member of the Fijian Association Party (FAP). Led by Navosa politician and high chief Adi Kuini Speed, the FAP entered the People's Coalition government with the Labour Party. Adi Kuini became deputy prime minister, while Ratu Silatolu remained on the backbenches. When George Speight burst into Fiji's parliament on 19 May 2000, the one politician who immediately joined the insurgents was Timoci Silatolu. He was also, at one point, announced as the Speight group's favoured choice for the prime ministership. Ratu Timoci pleaded 'not guilty' to charges associated with his role during the 2000 coup, and, as a result, received a much stiffer sentence than many of the other coup-instigators.

In the 2001 election, Ro Teimumu Kepa, for the first time, took the Rewa seat. Rewa had played an important role in the formation of the SDL prior to the 2001 poll, particularly as a result of the backing of Tui Noco, Ratu Josaiya Rayawa<sup>20</sup>, who later became a government nominee to the Senate. Ro Teimumu had entered the interim cabinet formed by Laisenia Qarase in July 2000 as Minister for Women, Culture, and Social Welfare.<sup>21</sup> In the August 2001 election, she secured a 51.5 per cent majority, defeating the incarcerated Silatolu, who stood alongside George Speight for the newly formed Conservative Alliance–Matanitu Vanua and obtained 34.4 per cent of the vote. Another 10

**Table 16.3** The 2006 election result in Rewa

Candidate	Political party	Votes won	Votes won/votes cast (per cent)
Ro Teimumu Kepa	SDL	3,401	56.4
Ro Filipe Tuisawau	Independent	2,371	39.3
Taniela R. Senikuta	FLP	167	2.8
Viliane V. Raile	Independent	95	1.6
Total		6,034	100.0

per cent of the Rewa vote in 2001 was taken by the SVT, which at that time still had a dwindling following in the province. Ro Epeli Mataitini, a member of the family of the Vunivalu of Rewa, had been SVT president, and fought a losing battle to sustain the SVT vote in the new millennium.

In 2006, the contest was a race between Ro Teimumu Kepa (who won 56.4 per cent of the vote) and Ro Filipe Tuisawau (39.3 per cent). The other parties jointly obtained only 4.4 per cent of the vote. The SVT did not stand. The results (see Table 16.3) suggest that Ro Filipe had considerable backing (despite lacking the official SDL nomination), and may pose a threat to Ro Teimumu in future elections. While Ro Filipe had strong support in some districts within the Rewa delta region, Ro Teimumu had overwhelming support in districts along the coast westward from Suva, on Beqa Island and in the Rewa villages within the Suva urban constituencies. The SDL's affirmative action policies assisted the coastal districts, where electricity, telephones and piped water had been connected through the villages. The perception amongst these voters was that, should they vote for Ro Filipe, they might be excluded from further assistance. The SDL campaign team had a strategic development plan used to court support in Rewa and other provinces around Fiji. Although election-related hostility between aunt and nephew was marked, it is notable that both put the Fiji Labour Party last on their list of preferences.

In Fiji, chiefly power remains firmly embedded in indigenous social and political tradition. As shown in Rewa in the 2006 poll, chiefs are able to use their traditional position to gain political mileage. The political endorsement of Ro Teimumu, and her achievements as Minister of Education, also legitimized her traditional position as the Roko Tui Dreketi. However, a growing younger, urbanized and educated generation is emerging, who are probably the vanguard of a new style of legitimate national leadership. They are not necessarily of chiefly status, but some are younger chiefs who have a measure of support in the provincial districts. The prevailing duality of political systems means that there is occasional conflict between traditional and democratic criteria for leadership. Good governance principles are essentially principles that promote democracy. Fijian chiefs face an ethical challenge arising from the dual legal and cultural systems and dual modes of authority, and some people argue that chiefs should concentrate solely on their traditional roles and keep out of

politics. When they do decide to participate in national politics, they need to ensure there are transparent democratic processes of selection and ensure that their political positions are based on meritocracy.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 'State council' or 'traditional district meeting'.
- <sup>2</sup> Nayacakalou, R. 1975. *Leadership in Fiji*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press in association with the University of the South Pacific, Melbourne, p.31.
- <sup>3</sup> Uncertainty about the figures arises from the fact that both the area to the west of Suva and one of the *tikinas* in the delta to the east of Suva are known as 'Rewa' *tikina*. Both are included in the data provided in Table 16.1.
- <sup>4</sup> Personal communication (with editors), Sakiusa Tuisolia, Chief Executive Officer of Airports Fiji, 4 June 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> The Great Council of Chiefs comprises representatives from Fiji's 14 provinces and the Council of Rotuma, as well as representatives nominated by the Minister of Fijian Affairs and the President, Vice President and Prime Minister, as well as former prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka who was made a 'life member' after the 1987 coup.
- <sup>6</sup> Derrick, R.A. 1946. *A History of Fiji*, Government Press, Suva, p.56.
- <sup>7</sup> Ro Teimumu Kepa succeeded her late sister, Ro Lady Lala Mara, Fiji's former First Lady, in 2004. Hence, the last two holders of the title have been women.
- <sup>8</sup> The provinces have direct input into national affairs through the Great Council of Chiefs and the Senate. The Great Council of Chiefs advises the government on indigenous affairs and also functions as an electoral college to elect the President and Vice President; 42 of the 55 members of the Great Council are chosen by the provincial councils, three from each province. In addition, 14 of the 32 members of the Senate, the upper house of the Fijian Parliament, are chosen by the provincial councils (one Senator each) and confirmed by the Great Council of Chiefs.
- <sup>9</sup> Fiji TV 1 National News, 22 March 2006.
- <sup>10</sup> These are supposedly the districts' men's, women's and youth leaders.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Fiji Times*, 24 March 2006. The Vunivalu title is the second highest in Rewa, and is held by the Mataitini family, who, like the family of the Roko Tui Dreketi, are from Lomanikoro village.
- <sup>12</sup> Fiji ballot papers have an 'above-the-line' section allowing voters to endorse party preferences (as opposed to ranking candidates themselves 'below-the-line').
- <sup>13</sup> *The Fiji Times*, 4 April 2006.
- <sup>14</sup> www.fijivillage.com, accessed 22 March 2006.
- <sup>15</sup> The Ka Levu title is that of the paramount chiefs of Nadroga, in western Viti Levu.
- <sup>16</sup> Derrick, 1946. *A History of Fiji*, p.56.
- <sup>17</sup> Derrick, 1946. *A History of Fiji*, p.57.
- <sup>18</sup> Fraenkel, J. 2000. 'The Clash of Dynasties and Rise of Demagogues; Fiji's Tauri Vakaukauwa of May 2000', *Journal of Pacific History* 35(3):302.
- <sup>19</sup> We are indebted to Robert Norton for clarification of this point.
- <sup>20</sup> Ratu Josia Rayawa had previously been president of the now-defunct Christian Democratic Alliance (VLV), which won three seats in the 1999 election.
- <sup>21</sup> 'Fiji Interim Cabinet Named', *Fijilive*, 28 July 2000.