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The 'Generals' – where to now?

The Yellow Bucket Team¹

The 2006 election resulted in fundamental change for the General voter² community in Fiji. For the first time, the 'Generals' party, the United Peoples Party (UPP) – with two of the three general communal seats – found itself forming the opposition. This was not entirely unfamiliar territory for party leader Mick Beddoes, as he had played the role of leader of the opposition for the opening period of the previous parliamentary session. However, on that occasion he was a party of one (albeit with support from New Labour Unity Party (NLUP) member Ofa Swann), the remaining general communal representatives – NLUP/ Independent Ken Zinck and the Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua's (SDL's) David Christopher – having joined the government.

The 'Generals' as opposition represents a huge shift from the traditions of General voter politics. It gave rise to spirited debate in the letters to the editor columns³ about the betrayal of indigenous Fijians by their *vasu* (part-European) relatives, is the cause of some concern, particularly amongst the older members of the part-European community.

The UPP is the latest in a succession of General voter parties that trace their origins back to the General Electors Association (GEA) established pre-independence. Led by figures like Charles Stinson, Doug Brown, Bill Clarke and Ted Beddoes, it stood in partnership with Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's Fijian Association as part of the Alliance Party, and some of its members occupied

prominent cabinet positions. Mick Beddoes himself, as a young and enthusiastic party organizer, played a role in those early elections, and often fondly reminisces about those post-independence days. Sitting now in opposition, having fought an election in coalition with the Indo-Fijian-dominated FLP, those Alliance days of power must seem a long way off.

But first, who are the Generals? The answer is complex, as they represent a mixture of all the ‘others’ – that is, anyone who can’t be classified as Fijian, Indian or Rotuman. While most in this community fall under the very broad category of part-European, or *kai loma*, they share the title with Europeans (usually more recently settled in Fiji), Chinese, Banabans, Koreans, Melanesian descendants of Solomon Island ‘blackbird indentured labourers’, Samoan and Tongan communities and other smaller communities. To add to the confusion, Fiji’s various constitutions have added to and subtracted from the communal roll. Pre-1987, the Rotumans were ‘Generals’. Under the 1990 constitution, they were given their own seat (although many Rotumans remain unsure where to register!). Similarly, the Melanesian community was formerly regarded as Fijian, but then moved to the General roll.

As a result, the Generals are notoriously difficult to typecast. Attitudes and voting behaviour can vary dramatically within an individual community. To complicate matters further, the three General communal electorates are quite distinct in their make-up and require individual analysis. It also appears that the number of voters on the General communal roll is in decline, possibly due to migration, but also to official confusion about the exact racial origin of a person. Such factors have led to potential Generals being registered on the Fijian roll – sometimes by request, but often as a result of mistakes by registration officials.

In recent years, in contrast to the early success of the GEA and, in the early 1990s, the General Voters Party (GVP), unifying the ‘Generals’ has proved difficult. There have been numerous splits – a history of which could be a chapter on its own – resulting finally in the formation of the United Generals Party (subsequently, the UPP) under Mick Beddoes’ leadership. This last name change was part of an ambitious attempt to capture the middle ground of Fiji politics.

Up until the mid-1990s, General politics, beyond internal personal rivalries, shared a common philosophy. With tiny numbers, the only way the Generals

could play a significant role in politics was to unite and align themselves with the dominant Fijian party of the time. However, despite all the talk of *vasu*, equally important was a belief that it was vital to stand independent and separate from the Fijians and Fijian politics. This fierce *kai loma* sense of racial/cultural pride has its roots in colonial segregation, and it contrasts with views held, for example, by the Banaban, Melanesian or other communities, which appear more comfortable voting with a Fijian party like the SDL. This drive to stand apart from the Fijians surfaced with the rise of Sitiveni Rabuka and the rise of Fijian nationalism.

Analysis of General politics has to take into account the varied views of the individual communities that make up this electorate. To make it even more complex, each of these communities tend to live in geographic pockets around the country – resulting in the three General communal constituencies having quite different dynamics.

Suva City General Communal is the smallest of the constituencies: its registered roll of just 3,515 for the 2006 election was down by 598, or 14.5 per cent, on 2001. Traditionally, the Chinese vote played a key role in this seat, but in the 1997 constitution, the number of General communal seats was reduced from five to three, and Nasinu was included in the Suva City General Communal constituency. This extension, combined with the political apathy of the local Chinese and a general decline in the legal Chinese population, has meant Chinese influence has declined. Nowadays, the constituency is much more varied in its make-up. While still dominated by part-European voters, the electorate has become much more westernized and liberal in its thinking, and has a recent history of being driven by individual qualities rather than by party politics. For example, Suva City General Communal and Suva City Open were the only seats where New Labour Unity Party candidates were successful in the 2001 general election.

The part-European voters of the Suva City General Communal electorate, described by one Fijian nationalist as the 'Eurocentrics', are particularly disturbed by the rise of Fijian nationalism, and of all the electorates Suva City General Communal appears most attracted to the politics of 'moderation' or multiracialism. A number of the more liberal churches, in particular the Catholic Church, have helped promote the moderate philosophy in this electorate. They

campaigning vigorously against the perceived erosion of human rights by the nationalists in the Methodist and evangelical churches. Religion reflects much of the difference between the *kai loma* community and their Fijian cousins. The vast majority of *kai loma* are Catholics, Anglicans or members of the more liberal Methodist congregations, like the Wesley Butt Street church in Suva. The Promotion of Reconciliation Tolerance and Unity Bill enraged them, confirming concerns and doubts that they had about the SDL government and, despite SDL's attempts to diffuse the issue, possibly contributing to the first count victory of the UPP's Bernadette Rounds Ganilau.

The resounding defeat of incumbent independent candidate and Minister of Labour Ken Zinck came as a surprise to many observers. It was a comprehensive victory on the first count for Rounds Ganilau who, as a prominent broadcaster, social worker and everyone's favorite mistress of ceremonies, swept to victory despite UPP's coalition with the Labour (FLP) party (more on this later). She was impressive on the campaign trail and, married to Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau's son, is a reminder of those reassuring times when the four great chiefs, led by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, ruled, and Fijian nationalism had yet to surface.

Ken Zinck's strong ties with the SDL, plus his very public and enthusiastic social life (Zinck consistently displayed himself live on local television, ukulele in hand, leading the cheer squad at most of Fiji's international sevens tournaments), was a bit much, particularly for the older section of the electorate. That, combined with strong female support for Rounds Ganilau and respect for the efforts of her leader, delivered the seat to the UPP.

The Western/Central General Communal electorate is the largest in terms of geographic area. It extends from the Tamavua River, including parts of upper Tamavua on the outskirts to Suva, across the western division to Ra. It encompasses a number of quite separate communities, including a large Melanesian group in Delainavesi, and quite separate *kai loma* clans in Lami, Sigatoka, Nadi, Lautoka, Vatukoula and areas stretching to the Tailevu provincial boundary.

Kai loma politics isn't easy to read or understand; it is almost impossible for those born outside the culture to comprehend. The great families operate like mini-dynasties, often controlled by matriarchs who guide the activities of family members from birth to marriage and through all the trials and tribulations of

life. Loyalties are fierce and outsiders regarded with deep suspicion. While most clans have connections into the Fijian community, these are typically stronger in the more northern rural communities.

Mick Beddoes is a master at playing *kai loma* family politics. He understands the various genealogical connections that tie these clans back to their various home bases. He worked hard and publicly as a constituency representative, holding regular constituency meetings – usually at the homes of key figures within the community – not only in his own constituency but across the country. His linkage with Labour disturbed some, but he overcame this with his energy, prominence and the strong stand he took against the Fijian nationalist element. Interestingly, however, the SDL did close the gap in this seat by presenting a strong Melanesian candidate. But the candidate was unknown outside his own community and appears not to have won much support beyond the Solomon Islanders.

Finally, there is the North Eastern General Communal constituency that covers Vanua Levu and Taveuni, down to Ovalau, through Tailevu, skirting Suva and stretching down to Kadavu. This was once dominated by Savusavu *kai loma* politicians like Ted Beddoes and Leo Smith, but the inclusion of the Banabans and Kioa islanders in the electorate changed this constituency dramatically – as was seen in 2001 when Banaban David Christopher won for the SDL.

Like the Viti Levu *kai loma*, northern clans' loyalties are strongly held – but, in contrast, they have greater empathy with the Fijian community. It is in these more rural communities that you see the real *vasu* relationship in action. Stories of fair-skinned, part-Europeans riding down from the hills and communicating solely in Fijian are common and reflect a key difference between the northern clans and their Viti Levu cousins. They love their politics, are notorious 'bush lawyers', and fierce rivalries often spring up within the community. However, the reality is that, as long as the Banaban/Kioa vote is united, the *kai loma* of the north have little chance of winning the northern seat. (Another factor in this constituency is the changes that tourism is bringing to Savusavu; many of the old freehold plantations are being sold to foreigners, reducing the power and influence of the old families.)

The Banaban vote is also heavily influenced by the views of the paramount chief, the Tui Cakau Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu. However, in 2006, the Banaban

vote partially split, with two alternative candidates challenging Christopher for the seat and, fatally for Christopher, giving preferences to candidates outside the Banaban/Kioa communities – in particular to the independent, Robin Irwin. Despite holding a good lead on the first count, the SDL incumbent failed to cross the 50 per cent threshold, handing the seat on preferences to Irwin. Irwin is an interesting character; a long time European Savusavu resident, he is a former vet and property developer. By standing and tirelessly campaigning in the last few elections, he built a solid support base; successfully negotiating preference support gave him victory. The UPP failed badly in this constituency, reflecting the very different attitudes held by northerners.

So where to now for the Generals and, more specifically, the UPP? Mick Beddoes has long dreamed of creating a political party capable of grabbing the middle multiracial ground of Fiji politics. He first attempted this in the 1990s with the formation of the All National Congress in partnership with the mercurial Apisai Tora. Its collapse led him to help form the United General Party. His spell as leader of the opposition during the court battles that took place after the 2001 election encouraged him to try again, and he adjusted the name of his party with the promise that they would contest all 71 seats in 2006.

As it turned out, he was only able to field 10 candidates and – squeezed between the FLP and the SDL, both of which moderated their position for the 2006 elections, and facing competition from the National Alliance and the NFP – he failed dismally to win support outside his core General base.

Six months before the general election, Beddoes made a coalition deal with the FLP. It seemed to many observers almost suicidal to commit so early to one of the major players, particularly to the FLP, whose leader, Mahendra Chaudhry, was not particularly popular amongst General voters.

If a week is a long time in politics, six months is an eternity – and so it proved for the UPP. In committing so completely to the FLP, Beddoes relinquished the one key bargaining chip he could bring to Fiji's political table – two of the three General voter's seats. In such a close-fought election this was valuable currency, as independents Robin Irwin and Jioji Konrote found out.

With only two seats – well short of the eight required to demand a position in cabinet – and committed to supporting Chaudhry, who didn't have the numbers

to win power anyway, the UPP was the only party shut out of government. This leaves the UPP and the 'Generals' in a difficult position. However, if the FLP were to return to the opposition benches, the UPP would be consigned to a parliamentary 'no man's land' – a far cry from the Generals glory days when figures like Stinson, Clarke, Brown, Falvey, Ted Beddoes and, more recently, Leo Smith and David Pickering held positions of real power.

Demographics will determine the future of Fiji politics. With a rapidly growing Fijian population and declining numbers of Indo-Fijians and others, the UPP and the General voters are in real danger of finding themselves irrelevant in Fiji politics. For the moment it seems unlikely that the UPP can win more than two or three seats. Their only hope is to return to the centre of Fiji politics, where they can hold the balance of power and ensure that the Generals win back their place at the political table.

Notes

- ¹ The 'yellow bucket' is a weekly column on Fiji politics and national affairs that can be found on fijivillage.com. Inspiration for the column is found, like many things in Fiji, around a yellow bucket of *yaqona* 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 the yellow bucket.
- ² General voters are those other than Fijian, Indian or Rotuman voters. Colloquially they are often referred to as 'the generals'. Three of the 46 communal seats in the Fiji parliament are reserved for general voters. Their seats represent the constituencies of Suva City General Communal, North Eastern General Communal and Western/Central General Communal.
- ³ See, for example, 'The Curse of the Kai Loma Vote', *Fiji Daily Post*, 24 February 2006.