

## EPILOGUE

# Understanding Fiji's political paradox

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The wide-ranging contributions to this volume on Fiji's 2006 general election and its aftermath reflect some continuities in the country's political history since the late colonial period. The land issue was central in the minds of Indo-Fijian farmers in the 1960s, when political party competition began, for many leases were being lost to the Fijian reserves. Indo-Fijians were at that time offered a choice between leaders who pushed strongly for radical constitutional changes and those who promised security and progress by working with conservative Fijian leaders. Perhaps in the formation of the post-2006 election multiparty cabinet we see a potential for that choice to emerge again as it did in the 1999 election. But the demographic trend, contrasting so starkly with the Indo-Fijian majority at the time of independence, is likely to discourage radicalism in Indo-Fijian leadership and strengthen the emphasis on cultivating Fijian allies.

Another continuity is the importance of chiefly influence and chiefly rivalries. Although the leading Fijian chiefs have, since 1987, been displaced at the helm of government by commoners or people of modest traditional rank, it is clear from the chapters by Tuimaleali'ifano, Tuitoga, and Saumaki,<sup>1</sup> how strong chiefly influence and rivalry continue to be – particularly at the local level, and even in areas such as Rewa that have long been subject to strong urban economic and cultural influences. It should be noted, however, that, contrary to popular assumption today, commoner representation among members of parliament has been strengthening since the late 1960s when, in fact, nearly

half the then twelve Fijians elected by popular vote to the colonial legislature were commoners. After the extension of adult franchise to Fijians in 1963, the Great Council of Chiefs' nominated representation was reduced to only two of the six Fijian members of the Legislative Council, and further weakened in 1966 to just two out of fourteen Fijian members. Since 1970, Fiji's constitution, in contrast to those of Tonga and Samoa, has not given chiefs (nobles in Tonga) any privileged representation in the main legislative assembly. The extent to which Fijians of chiefly rank have enjoyed influence in electoral politics has been due to traditional loyalties and to the significance acquired by leading chiefs as perceived bastions of Fijian identity and strength in the context of ethnic conflict – not to legal prerogative.

Bose and Fraenkel's inquiry into the fate of 'western separatism' addresses a dimension of politics that has long interested political analysts<sup>2</sup>: western Viti Levu as a regional seed-bed for the growth of radical challenge to the political establishment – among both Fijians and Indo-Fijians – with the potential to nurture political alliances. The 'National' in the National Federation Party (NFP) derives from the National Democratic Party in western Viti Levu that Apisai Tora and Isikeli Nadalo merged with A.D. Patel's Federation Party in 1968. Many western Fijians had resented the colonial government's privileging of southeastern Viti Levu and the eastern islands by way of support for education and development and recruitment to government jobs. Tora's earlier Western Democratic Party and Nadalo's Fijian National Party were born from those grievances, while the Federation Party simultaneously grew from the Indo-Fijian farmers' industrial struggles with the Colonial Sugar Refining Company.

Western Fijian dissent has waxed and waned, moderated partly by countervailing relationships between local chiefs and eastern political leaders, and by the greater force of ethnic consciousness. From the early 1970s, Ratu Mara strengthened his support in the west through his influence in the Western Tuis (chiefs) Association – which he helped establish – by directing development projects to the region, and by increasing westerner representation in parliament and cabinet. The leading western chief, Tui Vuda, was eventually recruited to government, along with others – including even Apisai Tora himself, once feared by the commercial and political establishment. When, in 1987, a new government was formed with a west Viti Levu Fijian (Timoci Bavadra) at last at the helm, Tora led street

marches in protest against it. Fijian nationalism, originating in southeast Viti Levu, became a far greater problem for Mara than dissent in the west. Political observers and aspirants alike have long tended to overestimate the potential for militant regionalism to weigh heavily in Fijian politics.

Laisenia Qarase's endeavour to become a national leader has been frustrated by the demands of Fijian extremists. The problem of Fijian ethno-nationalism has a long history. In his political planning for self-government, Ratu Mara argued patiently with younger Fijian colleagues in the leadership of the Fijian Association – soon to be the major body in the Alliance Party – to dissuade them from their initial vision of a 'Fiji for the Fijians'. If not for the untimely death in 1964 of the staunchest Fijian nationalist of that time, Ravuama Vunivalu, Mara's task would have been even more difficult. Soon after Mara and NFP president Siddiq Koya led Fiji to independence, Mara faced a far more daunting challenge from Sakeasi Butadroka and the Fijian Nationalist Party (FNP) that dashed his hope to strengthen Indo-Fijian representation in government. Just as Mara had his problem with the 'young Turks' in the Fijian Association, and later with the FNP, Rabuka was bedevilled by the 'Taukeists' and reactionary Methodists when, in the mid-1990s, he reinvented himself politically to embark on the project of constitutional reform. Qarase may have succeeded in taming Fijian ethno-nationalism for the moment, but it is likely to continue to haunt him. All three leaders have also been constrained by the political need to placate provincial or *vanua* rivalries and grievances. These are likely to be intensified by the strengthening nexus between political power and access to material benefits of various kinds.

What is perhaps most remarkable about the 2006 election is the way its outcome repeats a pattern of dialogue and conciliation that had followed phases of crisis on the eve of Fiji's independence – and that emerged again several years after Rabuka's coups. Labour Party leader Krishna Datt is surely to Laisenia Qarase, what Jai Ram Reddy was to Sitiveni Rabuka, and Siddiq Koya to Ratu Mara: a partner in projects of political reform aimed at bridging the ethnic political divide. The strong accord that quickly grew between Mara and Koya following the death of A.D. Patel late in 1969, was a triumph over an ethnic polarization that came close to widespread violence following the NFP victory in by-elections forced by that party's boycott of the colonial parliament.<sup>3</sup> The

understanding that grew between Reddy and Rabuka in the late 1990s seemed a strong echo of that historic pact, and the conciliatory potential now appears yet again in Qarase's relationship with Datt.

This brings me to Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi's observation about 'the paradox' of the recent elections: such a strong ethnic polarization, yet followed by a promising start to collaboration in a multiparty cabinet.<sup>4</sup> This outcome directs attention to the question of the nature of ethnic difference and conflict in Fiji, the paradox that such electoral polarity is not necessarily a measure of the intractability of conflict.

After the many elections and much experimentation with multi-ethnic political organization since parties first competed for power in 1966, the ethnic divide persists in the political arena as starkly as ever, confounding the visions of proponents of grand theoretical narratives about inevitable directions of political change driven by forces of modernity. When the question of Fiji's political development first loomed large in academic debate, following Rabuka's coups, Marxist and liberal democratic analysts agreed that ethnic identities and conflicts must surely fade in the political arena under the increasing weight of cross-cutting interests evident in the market economy. The major obstacles to dispelling the allegedly false consciousness of race or ethnicity, it was confidently claimed, were the vested interests and manipulative rhetoric of the powerful (especially Fijian chiefs).

Generalizing paradigms, fashioned from western experience and ideals, have tended to impede the understanding of Fiji's complexities and paradoxes, obscuring more than they illuminate. Insufficient attention has been given to discerning the social and political dynamics of the society in its particularity. How might we understand Fiji in terms of its distinctive features and history? In these respects it is helpful to inquire into how Fiji differs from other small-scale post-colonial societies such as Trinidad and Guyana in the Caribbean, where ethnic identities also continue to dominate political alignments despite the strong presence of cross-cutting interests of social class. How might an inductive understanding of these national histories offer inspiration for theorizing about the nature of ethnic conflicts? To stress the significance of the ethnic divide in such societies is not at all to deny the importance of the cross-cutting interests and values associated with occupation, social class, consumerism, and shared

citizenship. Rather, it is to recognize the special problems that ethnic differences and conflicts pose for the design of political institutions that might allow effective expression of common interests. It is a question of what institutional arrangements would best constrain and contain the ethnic concerns and tensions, what form of democratic government would best suit a society like Fiji? The paradoxical outcome of the 2006 election suggests support for this perspective. It dramatized the compatibility of strong expression of ethnic group allegiances in the electoral arena with prospects for dialogue and compromise in the executive and parliament on issues concerning interests shared across the ethnic divide (such as urban poverty, educational and health service needs, and rural development), as well as on issues which, while largely placing the major ethnic groups in opposition, are nonetheless negotiable (such as land-leasing and affirmative action for Fijians). I will return to the question of dialogue and negotiation later.

An important point to make in connection with the paradox Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi highlights concerns the extent to which, as Fraenkel observes, the generally agreeable mood of everyday inter-ethnic relations tends to be insulated from ethnic conflict at the political level.<sup>5</sup> There have, of course, been times when political tensions flood into these relations to the point of abuse and violence, and we cannot ignore the longstanding mutually denigrating stereotypes. Yet, what perhaps most distinguishes Fiji from many other countries with deep ethnic divisions, is the degree to which cooperation and friendliness in everyday relations has resisted corrosion by political conflict.

I recall illustrative vignettes from my field research: Ratu Mara's political lieutenant, David Toganivalu, campaigning in the villages to strengthen the Fijian Association against the Federation Party in 1966 – with dire warnings about threats to political privilege and land – and then relaxing at clubs in Suva to share drinks and play snooker with Indo-Fijian friends; Isimeli Bose, principal author of the controversial *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* submission to the Constitutional Review Commission in 1995 – with its unrelenting discourse on justifications for Fijian resentments against Indo-Fijians – explaining that treatise to me as we sat alone in the board room of Vinod Patel Co (hardware suppliers to the Ba Provincial Council), and then our affable encounter with the Patel men as we left; my old teacher friend Narayan Govind, staunch NFP

and later FLP man, recounting friendly street chats with Sakeasi Butadroka, who had moved in parliament that Indo-Fijians be deported to India ('Buta is not really a bad man you know...').

Literature on life in Trinidad and Guyana, and observations by Indo-Fijians who have visited these countries, suggest that routine inter-ethnic relations there (between people of East Indian and African descent) are more often marred by antipathy than is the case in Fiji, despite a greater convergence in similar occupations and lifestyles, which many intellectuals and politicians long hoped would encourage social and political integration. There seems to be a greater conjunction of ethnically polarized political relations with the mood of everyday social relations, the long-standing competition and antipathy in everyday life influencing the tensions of the political arena more than the reverse.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, it is also very significant that in Guyana and Trinidad political power has, in recent years, been transferred from one ethnically based party to another without incurring major violence, and certainly not coups d'état.<sup>7</sup> This further highlights the need to inquire into the distinctive features of Fiji: a place where, in everyday life, ethnic relations tend, for the most part, to be harmonious despite the marked cultural, social and economic differences, and where political polarization does not preclude friendly dialogue and compromise, but where transfer of political power has not been tolerated. A place where, as Firth and Fraenkel remark, democracy seems to work only so far as it keeps the indigenous Fijians in political control.<sup>8</sup>

To understand the paradox of the 2006 Fiji election we must consider it in relation to some aspects of the bifurcated nature of Fiji society, economy, and polity as these were shaped by colonial policy and practice. The term *bifurcated* highlights Fiji's contrast with Trinidad and Guyana which, for all their ethnic tensions, are best described as *unitary* societies in respect to an essentially shared, if highly competitive, engagement in common institutions, most importantly the economy and political system in which there has been no institutional privileging of ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup> The old term *plural society*, applicable in some respects to all these countries, glosses over this important difference.

The most obvious contrast with Fiji is that indigenous Amerindian populations are very small (almost non-existent in Trinidad), and have hardly figured at all in national politics, let alone enjoyed special rights. There is no

constitutional differentiation of ethnic group rights – as there is in Fiji – and no history of a compulsory separation in space, such as was rigidly maintained for most Fijians by the colonial administration. There is no ethnic difference in prerogatives of land ownership. Cultural differences are slighter than in Fiji, a fact belied by the apparently stronger ethnic antipathies; the most significant cultural differences are in religion and in family and marriage customs. The Hindi language has not been as strongly preserved as it has in Fiji, and the vast majority of descendants of the African slaves speak only English. Over the last four decades, however, there have been ‘movements’ of rediscovery and reassertion of cultural difference among both the Indian and African populations, and these movements have been associated with political rivalry. By their oppositional energy, the cultural revivalist efforts have more strongly influenced ethnic tensions in Trinidad and Guyana, than the deeper, but taken-for-granted and routinely lived, cultural differences have contributed to ethnic tension in Fiji.

A major aspect of the bifurcation of Fiji was the structure of the capitalist economy in which, for a very long time, the great majority of indigenous Fijians were only marginal participants. Their predominantly subsistence village-based lifestyle, forcibly maintained by colonial laws, produced an enduring sense of economic weakness in the wider society, and yet at the same time facilitated the supply of much of the best arable land for relatively cheap leasing by Indo-Fijian farmers. Compulsory village living for most indigenous Fijians minimized their dependence on rent income and, therefore, indirectly subsidized Colonial Sugar Refining Company profits by keeping down the price the company needed to pay to the Indo-Fijian tenant farmers for their sugar cane. Of course, the confinement of most Fijians to their villages also supported the CSR Co.’s project of developing a highly skilled Indo-Fijian labour force, wholly committed by financial necessity to the industry. By the mid 1930s the CSR Co. was firmly opposed to a strong Fijian participation in cane farming, viewing that prospect as a threat to the efficiency it had developed through the Indo-Fijian small farmer system.<sup>10</sup>

Associated with this highly unbalanced yet complementary ethnic divide in the economy was the privileged status of Fijians – through their leading chiefs – in the colonial state, and the strengthening of the Fijian conviction – in the transition to independence – of their entitlement to political pre-eminence.<sup>11</sup> Ethnic Fijian convictions about who they are in modern Fiji, their sense of worth

and strength in the wider society, became inextricably tied in with their leaders' power in the state, just as, for Indo-Fijians, strength and social status came to be identified especially with individual ability and success in the capitalist economy, whether as farmers, businessmen, or independent professionals.

Yet it is a mistake to understand this bifurcation simply as the source of conflict. We need to recognize the distinctive modes of inter-ethnic 'getting along', of accommodation through dialogue, negotiation, and conciliation, which the bifurcated structure of Fiji has encouraged over many decades of intermittent impasses and crises. Bridging difference has long been a central value in public social and political life. At the level of social interaction, there has been a remarkable ease of sociability, facilitated by the relative absence of the kind of status rivalry and economic competition that have contributed to ethnic enmity in Trinidad and Guyana. Indeed, it might be argued that inter-ethnic sociability in Fiji has in a way been facilitated and encouraged by the reality of deeper cultural and social differences. The value of 'the races coming together' is affirmed in a variety of social contexts, from social and sports clubs to community service groups, local government councils, and town festivals. Regularly bridging difference, getting happily together despite persisting divides in much of routine social life, became a shared value that began to emerge in the last two decades of the colonial era.<sup>12</sup>

At the national political level, as at the local social level, there has evolved a culture of interaction. There are the long-standing major issues about which there has repeatedly been dialogue and conciliation, not just acrimonious dispute. Indeed, the great issues of land and the constitution have enabled and encouraged the objectification of ethnic conflict as a shared problem for dialogue and conciliation. The domain of national political relations has been regulated over a long period of time, especially by consultative institutions such as the Great Council of Chiefs and by negotiable issues. After successful deliberation on highly contentious matters, with phases of tension and mutual recrimination, there comes a sense of shared achievement and a celebration of what binds the opponents after all. The energizing context for such moments is partly the very depth of the divide itself, and its distinctive character of different and conflicting domains of interest about which there can be negotiation and accommodation.

Political conflict associated with the ethnic divide in Fiji has tended to have this characteristic of negotiability, and in this respect sometimes bears comparison with enduring conflicts in industrial relations. The most notable instances include: the agreements on reform of the terms of land leasing that led to the passage of the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Ordinance in 1966, at the height of political party conflict, and of the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act in 1976 (also amidst political tension); the quite remarkable negotiation of agreements for constitutional reform in 1969–70 and in 1996–97 after phases of severe ethnic tension; and, most recently, the agreement on the multiparty cabinet after several years of argument and court cases following the traumas of 2000.

Biman Prasad's chapter is especially interesting for its focus on the significance of issues on which political parties seem to be converging, and on each party's rhetorical efforts to attract support from across the ethnic divide.<sup>13</sup> However, Prasad is perhaps mistaken in drawing a stark contrast between 'race-based' and 'issue- and ideology-based' political competition. The ethnic or race divide has itself long been partly determined by issues; ethnic support for political parties, as Fraenkel notes, has not been simply a matter of ethnic sentiments and prejudices.<sup>14</sup> A study of issues in Fiji politics must include the examination of issues on which the major parties are strongly opposed but which are open to compromising dialogue. These issues, like those of increasing agreement that Prasad focuses on, have tended to be 'masked' by ethnic polarization.

The question of the special interests of the indigenous Fijians has itself long been an issue open to dialogue and agreement, with a lineage going back to the famous debate in the colonial parliament in 1946 on 'safeguarding the Fijian race' (often referred to as the 'Deed of Cession' debate). This debate, after an acrimonious start, concluded in a relaxed mood of accord, with all agreeing on the principle of at least a protective paramountcy of Fijian interests.<sup>15</sup> In the late 1960s, the NFP campaigned as the party committed to defending not just the rights of Indo-Fijians but also the interests of the *Taukei* (Fijians) against alleged oppression and exploitation by an alliance of European capitalists, Fijian chiefs, and colonial officials. The NFP was indeed the first political party to declare that it wanted to make the needs and concerns of the *Taukei* a national issue, and it was the NFP leaders who, in the dialogue that led to independence, proposed giving the Great Council of Chiefs veto power in the Senate.

The importance of negotiable issues is a favourable condition for the new multiparty cabinet. Provincial and *vanua* pressures influencing Qarase in the allocation of resources and appointments are likely to compromise his will to indulge requests and proposals from his FLP cabinet colleagues, and may threaten to undermine the collaboration – the fate of Ratu Mara’s attempt to increase Indo-Fijian participation in his Alliance Party government during the 1970s and 1980s. But if Qarase wishes to strengthen the new collaboration, perhaps with a view to encouraging political re-alignments and building Indo-Fijian electoral support, he must make these concessions and allow the FLP cabinet ministers to share in decision-making about the delivery of patronage in the constituencies, as well as in the making of policy.

Of course, Fijian disaffection with Qarase’s government might itself favour new inter-ethnic alliances. Durutalo suggests that, while the SDL has succeeded for the present in unifying Fijians by way of an ideological ‘orthodoxy’ centring on the theme of the unity of *vanua* (Fijian community and its land), *lotu* (church) and *matanitu* (the state), in the longer term imbalances in SDL policies ‘may be seen as offering solutions to some groups of indigenous Fijians only’.<sup>16</sup> While such imbalance might provoke destabilizing rivalries among Fijian political leaders, it might also offer opportunities for an Indo-Fijian-based political party to cultivate new Fijian allies, a strategy that the demographic trend toward an increasing Fijian majority will surely encourage.

The 2006 election is the first in which the army actively sought to influence voters, conducting an ‘educational’ campaign to explain the officers’ opposition to the SDL government’s proposed Promotion of Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill. In considering the question of the army’s involvement in Fiji’s political life, there is an interesting comparison to be made with the Great Council of Chiefs. In the course of crisis and constitutional change over the last two decades, both institutions have become powerful actors in the political arena. Both are viewed by most indigenous Fijians as bastions of protection for their ethnic interests, and both have played a part in the assertion of Fijian demands for political paramouncy. Yet both have also supported political stability and a multi-ethnic constitution by helping to constrain Fijian ethno-nationalism.

The contrasting figures of Sitiveni Rabuka and Voreqe Bainimarama as commanders dramatically illustrate these different possible directions of military

action in the political arena: Rabuka, once the charismatic champion of indigenous hegemony who threw out Fiji's independence constitution, and Bainimarama, resolutely maintaining his stance of professional responsibility not to side with Fijian ethno-nationalists but to defend the 1997 constitution against them.

Past Fijian political leaders, including Ratu Sukuna, Ratu Mara, Ratu Penaia Ganilau, Ratu Edward Cakobau, and Rabuka himself, were crucially important in their capacities to persuade members of the Great Council of Chiefs, typically very conservative and ethnocentric, to agree to various reforms in the national interest in respect to land and the constitution. But the uncertainty of such influence and guidance was dramatized by the divisions that emerged in this forum during the coup crisis of May 2000. Like the Council of Chiefs, the military has become an institution with political power, whose contribution to the political process, whether in support of an excluding ethno-nationalism (or perhaps provincialism) or of building an equitable multi-ethnic society, is likely to continue to be contingent on the will and persuasive authority of particular leaders.

## Postscript

The armed forces have three massive political advantages over civilian organisations: a marked superiority in organisation, a highly emotionalised and symbolic status, and a monopoly of arms. They form a prestigious corporation or Order, enjoying overwhelming superiority in the means of applying force. The wonder, therefore, is not why this rebels against its civilian masters, but why it ever obeys them.<sup>17</sup>

Rabuka's coups in 1987, efficiently executed by a powerful army in support of Fijian ethno-nationalist demands, created the spectre of recurring military interventions. I wrote at the time that 'it seems most improbable that the army might cease to be a crucial factor in Fiji's political life in the foreseeable future'.<sup>18</sup> The ethno-nationalism that provoked Rabuka's two coups has remained a chronic source of crisis or impasse in Fiji's democratic political system, and was the major factor driving Speight's coup in 2000 and Bainimarama's interventions in 2000 and 2006.

Yet what is most interesting about the four military interventions in Fiji is the shift from actions strongly embedded in ethnic sentiments and objectives, to actions claimed by the army leaders to fulfil their responsibility to ensure the

good governance of the nation by combating that same ethno-nationalism. The military has become a political force in its own right, attempting to manage the intractable problems of ethnic conflict that have long marred democratic government in Fiji.

Bainimarama's imposition of martial law soon after the 'Speight coup' in May 2000, was widely welcomed in Fiji as rescuing the country from a prospect of growing violence. A striking feature of the popular responses to Bainimarama's coup in December 2006 has been the frequent supportive remarks by Indo-Fijians – the declaration that 'we Indians are happy about this coup' is commonly heard. The commander had become well known for his stand against Fijian ethno-nationalists and support of non-discriminatory government. Moreover, an immediately felt consequence of this coup, with its ongoing deployment of armed soldiers at street checkpoints, was a reduction in violent robberies of Indo-Fijian and Chinese businesses and homes by young Fijian men. In one well-publicized incident, a group of Indo-Fijian town councillors presented soldiers with packed meals to thank them for their presence.

This latest coup is nonetheless an expression of ethnic Fijian power and identity, and, for the soldiers, a legitimate form of communal Fijian action. Yet, paradoxically, it is an expression of Fijian strength that conceivably might have potential to help resolve the longstanding dilemma of how to reconcile the Fijian conviction of entitlement to state power with the multi-ethnic reality of the society and economy. This dilemma is a legacy of the bifurcation of Fiji created by colonial rule, and discussed earlier in this chapter.

During the three decades before independence, colonial officials had encouraged the strengthening of the Fijian position in two arms of the state: the Fijian Administration and the Royal Fiji Military Forces, which were linked by several chiefs who had served with authority in both. In the 1960s, this strengthened Fijian position in the colonial state led the British officials, who were preparing Fiji for self-government, to abandon an initial plan to introduce a common franchise to replace ethnic voting and representation. The Fijian political leaders' vehement opposition to the proposal raised fears of the possibility of violent upheaval, especially in the event of disaffection in the predominantly Fijian army.

The Fijian Administration, in close relationship with the Great Council of Chiefs, supported a political élite of high-ranking chiefs who were able to preserve their dominance of Fijian leadership after the advent of party politics and the Fijian franchise in the 1960s, in the context of ethnic tension. Their lieutenants in the Fijian Association campaigned in the villages to persuade popular acceptance of the multi-ethnic Alliance Party as the means by which Fijians could secure political power (the Fijian Association was the dominant body in the Alliance).

However, it was in the electoral arena that the ability of these leaders to accommodate the interests of non-Fijian groups, especially the Indo-Fijians, was eventually weakened by the emergence of the Fijian Nationalist Party. This extremist pressure, together with rapid economic and social changes that were transforming Fijian needs and expectations, began to erode the strength of the paramount chiefs in political leadership several years after independence.

By contrast, the Fijian-dominated army steadily strengthened during the early post-colonial decades, in size and weaponry, and in the sophistication and experience of its personnel. Major ingredients for this strengthening have been service with UN peace-keeping forces in the Middle East and elsewhere, and the interventions in Fiji's political arena. The military has sometimes been led by high-ranking chiefs, and it has strong affinities with traditional Fijian society and the colonial Fijian Administration in respect to its hierarchical structure and communal values. But the army has also long been a domain in which commoner Fijians have been able to achieve status and career advancement, or at least economic security, and thus many indigenous Fijian families have army ties. In the popular view, soldiering is a mark of Fijian achievement and strength. Like the administrative bureaucracies concerned with Fijian affairs, the army developed as a Fijian institutional domain counter-balancing Indo-Fijian strength in the world of business and professions. Although the army is open to recruits from any ethnic background, it continues to be an overwhelmingly indigenous Fijian body.

As mentioned, attempts by Fijians, chiefly and non-chiefly, to become national political leaders attending to the interests of Indo-Fijians and others, have repeatedly been frustrated by the challenges from Fijian extremists. By contrast, Fijian extremism has helped to strengthen the army as a political force

by providing a springboard for the seizure of political power – initially in support of ethno-nationalist demands, but recently in opposition to them.

Rabuka deposed a government which most Fijians rejected as illegitimate, but that most Indo-Fijians supported. Twenty years later, Bainimarama threw out a government most Fijians supported, and that most Indo-Fijians opposed as discriminatory and corrupt, an embodiment of Fijian power oppressive to them. This contrast between the coups of 1987 and 2006 is a measure of the growth of the military as an independent political force, with corporate beliefs in its possession of special responsibilities and rights which surpass the authority of elected governments that are broken or compromised by Fijian ethno-nationalist groups.

The army now conceives itself to be the most important part of the state, as much in the protection of domestic order and governance as in matters of external defence. This claim is backed by invoking a now much-debated clause in Fiji's current constitution which, the army insists, implicitly preserves the following provision in the previous constitution established by Rabuka in 1990: 'It shall be the overall responsibility of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces to ensure at all times the security, defence and well-being of Fiji and its peoples'.<sup>19</sup>

The army's conviction about its political prerogative is vividly conveyed in a 'message' from the commander to his men published in the RFMF newsletter just before the 2006 election:

I can assure you, my loyal soldiers, that whatever government comes into power will not be a threat to our existence because the military in Fiji is strongly intertwined and embedded on the firm belief that without the RFMF there is no spine to our democracy or sovereignty. Politicians have a somewhat distorted perception of why we exist. We are the final guarantor of security in this country. For without a dedicated, loyal and strong military there can be no security or stability. And national sustenance and the successful generation of economic wealth can only be achieved if you have a military dedicated to its call of duty and one that champions truth and justice.<sup>20</sup>

The crises of 2000 were the crucible for this transformation of the army's corporate mission. In particular, these events largely explain the great weight of the personal motivations and iron resolve of the commander in the long lead-up to the 2006 coup.

Bainimarama, scarcely 15 months into his post after appointment from the navy over the heads of several eligible military officers, returned to Suva from an overseas trip in May 2000 to experience threats on his life and to find his

forces in danger of a catastrophic split. After holding his men together and taking control of the country under martial law, he faced renewed threats to his life and his army from an attempted mutiny. These traumatic events compelled an obsessive personal mission to strengthen the RFMF as a force to combat the threat of Fijian ethno-nationalism which Bainimarama viewed as continuing to dominate and corrupt the government he had put in place and that was returned to power in the elections of 2001 and 2006. Bainimarama initiated a program of indoctrinating his officers and troops on their duty to become guardians of good governance for the nation. Officers who were not sympathetic to his vision resigned or were expelled.

The project of preparing the military for an on-going political role has precedent in a plan drafted by Rabuka and his officers in 1989 to institute a lengthy period of army rule, in support of objectives of advancing indigenous Fijians in the economy. Severe measures were then proposed, including suppression of trade unions and 'neutralization' of political leaders deposed by Rabuka's first coup.<sup>21</sup> The plan was abandoned after its rejection by the president Ratu Penaia Ganilau and the prime minister Ratu Mara. Bainimarama is pursuing a very different agenda, initially against the resistance of the Great Council of Chiefs, and after pushing aside the vice-president, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, one of Fiji's highest-ranking chiefs and a former High Court judge and unbending defender of constitutional government.

This latest coup d'état presents the paradox of the army as the strongest embodiment of indigenous Fijian power supporting a project ostensibly aimed at transforming governance to serve the needs of the multi-ethnic nation, especially by eliminating discriminatory policies and practices. How to counter the tendency for ethnic interests and conflicts to dominate political life has been Fiji's major problem since the advent of party politics 40 years ago. Perhaps an entrenchment of ethnic Fijian power through an enduring overseer role for the military in the domains of political competition and government could have the potential to encourage more flexibility for inter-ethnic cooperation, given that the issue of securing Fijian pre-eminence in the state would then have been removed from the arena of political struggle.

However, the major political reality in Fiji now is the fact of military-backed rule, whatever its proclaimed agenda. Military power, directly or indirectly

exercised, contains its own imperatives and tendencies that inevitably encourage resort to the organization's special capacity to dominate the populace by use or threat of physical force. At the time of writing, the army is more preoccupied with displaying this coercive power than with making credible attempts to pursue its proclaimed mission to 'clean-up' alleged corruption and malpractice of the deposed government. Rhetoric about this national-reform purpose of the coup is being used to justify intimidation of people who strongly voice their opposition to the takeover. They are denigrated as threats to the army's work for the well-being of the nation. Some have been assaulted or bullied after being taken from their homes or work places to the barracks.

Will an army leadership that attempts a guardian role for the nation and encourages inter-ethnic cooperation in government remain committed to this mission over the long term? Several trends might work against the project. Military officers might develop vested interests in strengthening their control in various domains of government. There is the possibility, perhaps related to such a trend, that politically destabilizing rivalries will emerge within the army leadership, along old *vanua* or provincial lines. There remains, too, the possibility of a return to an ethnocentric exercise of power under changed leadership and in response to popular indigenous Fijian discontents.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Saumaki, B. 2007. 'Bose ni Vanua and democratic politics in Rewa', this volume; Tuimaleali'ifano, M. 2007. 'Indigenous title disputes: what they meant for the 2006 polls', this volume; Tuitoga, A. 2007. 'Tailevu North: five years down the line', this volume.
- <sup>2</sup> Bose, A. & Fraenkel, J. 2007. 'Whatever happened to western separatism?', this volume. The regional factor in Fiji politics was originally analysed in Norton, R. 1977. *Race and Politics in Fiji*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1st edn.
- <sup>3</sup> Norton, R. 2004. 'Seldom a transition with such aplomb: From confrontation to conciliation on Fiji's path to independence', *Journal of Pacific History*, 39(2):163–84, pp.176–84.
- <sup>4</sup> Madraiwiwi, Ratu Joni. 2007. 'An election retrospective', this volume.
- <sup>5</sup> Fraenkel, J. 2006. 'Polarization and power-sharing: the paradox of Fiji's 2006 election'. Address to the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, National Reconciliation and Unity seminar on National Identity and Multiculturalism, 19 July, Suva.
- <sup>6</sup> Ethnic antipathies in Guyana and Trinidad were historically influenced by a social status rivalry carried on in terms of values and norms of life-style and conduct imposed by the British colonial rulers. The Afro-Guyanese and Afro-Trinidadians were particularly imbued with these values, having lost most of their ancestral culture under slavery and having been pressured to

acquiesce in Anglo cultural hegemony in their quest for economic and social progress after emancipation. This acquiescence produced the deep tensions of what some writers have termed 'double consciousness', graphically characterized by Franz Fanon's phrase 'black skin white masks'. The Africans' endeavour to conform with the colonizers' cultural values and norms was constantly rebutted in social relations and in their own minds by the colonizers' racism. This chronic insecurity of identity and status sharpened their antagonistic rivalry with the East Indians who were more socially and psychologically secure in their retention of far more of their ancestral cultures and eventually rivalled the Africans for advancement in the urban middleclass. In Fiji there is competition in the economy, and some mutual antipathy. But this is not really comparable with the kind of social rivalries and antipathies that developed under the very different colonial experience in the Caribbean. Colonial policies protected and valorized many aspects of indigenous Fijian culture and society and encouraged a strong preservation of Indian cultures. Under these conditions, ethnic relations in Fiji developed without the corrosive edge of status insecurities produced by a colonial cultural hegemony of the kind that became characteristic in the Caribbean societies. The contrast is perceptively analysed by Chandra Jayawardena, in his 1980 paper 'Culture and Ethnicity in Guyana and Fiji', *Man* 15:430–50; for Guyana see also Williams, B. 1991. *Stains on My Name, War in My Veins: Guyana and the politics of cultural struggle*, Duke University Press, Durham.

- 7 Meighoo, K. 2003. *Politics in a Half Made Society: Trinidad and Tobago 1925–2000*, Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston, pp.183–277.
- 8 Firth, S. & Fraenkel, J. 2007. 'Introduction: Changing calculus and shifting visions', this volume.
- 9 Jayawardena. 1980. 'Culture and ethnicity in Guyana and Fiji'; Karran, K. (ed.) 2000. *Race and Ethnicity in Guyana*, Offerings Publication, Demerara; Ryan, S. 1972. *Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- 10 Norton, R. 1999. 'Chiefs for the nation: Containing ethno-nationalism and bridging the ethnic divide in Fiji', *Pacific Studies*, 22(1):21–50, pp.34, 38–39.
- 11 Norton, R. 2002. Accommodating indigenous privilege: Britain's dilemma in decolonising Fiji', *Journal of Pacific History*, 37(2):133–56, pp.135–37.
- 12 Norton, R. 1990. *Race and Politics in Fiji* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, pp.54–58; Bossen, C. 2000. 'Festival mania, tourism, and nation-building in Fiji: the case of the Hibiscus Festival', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 12(1):123–54.
- 13 Prasad, B. 2007. 'Reflections on the economic and social policies of political parties', this volume.
- 14 Fraenkel, J. 2007. 'Bipolar realignment under the alternative vote system: an analysis of the 2006 electoral data', this volume.
- 15 Norton, R. 1990. *Race and Politics in Fiji* pp.55–56.
- 16 Durutalo, A. 2007. 'Defending the inheritance: The SDL and the 2006 election', this volume.
- 17 Samuel Finer 1976 *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Penguin, London, p.5.
- 18 Norton *Race and Politics in Fiji* 1990 p.152.
- 19 Constitution of Fiji, 1990, Clause 94 (3).
- 20 *Mataivalu* No.11, March–April 2006, p.2.
- 21 Callick, R. 'Fijian army at the ready to assume control', (Australian) *Financial Review*, 25 September 1989, pp.1, 10.