

PREFACE

Fiji's perpetual legitimacy crisis

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This book was born out of the need for greater scrutiny of Fiji's elections. Not since 1963 had a Fiji election been subjected to any book-length scrutiny. In comparison, for example, neighbouring Papua New Guinea had earned itself a book for each election since independence. We were determined to redress that literary imbalance. There had been a significant number of substantial, and often excellent, event-specific documentary accounts of post-independence elections, but no broader exploration of the social context of electoral politics. Owing to the odd mix of communal representation and the new-fangled post-1997 voting system, Fiji elections had become a focus of considerable international commentary amongst political scientists and international electoral systems specialists. From within the country, also, elections posed repeatedly awkward challenges. Indeed, that was what had sparked the international debate. A constitutional crisis had dislodged Fiji Indian-backed elected governments in 1977, and coups had done the same in 1987 and 2000. Elections had, in each case, sparked the controversy. Could Fiji's 2006 election find some way out of that starkly polarized history? Would the power-sharing, or the multiparty cabinet that ensued from the 2006 election, prove the master-key to ethnic accommodation, and enable Fiji to re-orient itself away from the debilitating politics of ethnic polarization?

That much was the theme of our originally intended book; its relevance has been modified but not obliterated by subsequent events. We knew that the passage of time would change the significance of the May 2006 election. We also knew that the military commander believed the government corrupt and

wanted it defeated. But when the election came and went, and the government was re-elected, and the commander fell silent, we hoped that Fiji had averted the threat of military intervention. The formation of a power-sharing cabinet, for the first time bringing together representatives from the two starkly polarized political parties, backed respectively by the bulk of ethnic Fijians and Fiji Indians, seemed to offer a unique solution to Fiji's perpetual political impasse. That was the perspective offered by then Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, included in this volume, and rightly so. And it was a viewpoint embraced, for a time, also by the commander of Fiji's military forces. Popular optimism abounded, and Fiji – for the first time – seemed to have found a home-grown strategy for the supersession of ethnic fractionalization.

Under these circumstances, the important task was to gather together a diverse group of people to comment upon and analyse the election from a wide variety of perspectives. In a workshop held at the University of the South Pacific in June 2006, we gave an opportunity for prospective contributors to share thoughts and tackle various election-related themes, and the proceedings of that event form the backbone of this book. Few anticipated at that time that, less than seven months after the election, yet another coup, on 5 December, would breach the banks of Fiji's democracy, transforming the 18 May election into a last gasp before the country lurched once more into military government. Yet, coups do not easily obliterate the significance of their preceding election. That was true of the 1987 and 1999 polls which, albeit annulled by subsequent coups, commanded an enduring historical interest. The difference, as regards the 2006 poll, was oddly that the boot was on the other foot. This time, unlike 1987 or 1999, it was a coup that dislodged a government elected on the basis of majority ethnic-Fijian support.

Fiji has established two methods of changing government since 1987: elections and coups. Neither is fully accepted as settling the matter. In the last two decades, the democratic result has determined the formation of governments on three occasions (1992, 1994 and 2001) but it has not done so, or done so for only a short time, on another three occasions (1987, 1999 and 2006). The army did not accept the outcome in 1987, and staged a coup. When the 1999 election brought to power the country's first prime minister of Indian origin, many indigenous Fijians refused to accept the result and welcomed his overthrow by George Speight a year later. The army then took

over, and installed an interim administration. And when an election returned the Qarase government to office in 2006, the army seized power once again, claiming that the election result was not in the national interest and dismissing democracy as a mere 'numbers game'. None of Fiji's previous coups has resulted in a lasting military government: Fiji is not Burma. Instead, both domestic and international pressures have encouraged a return to constitutional democracy as each wave of rulers seeks to consolidate its legitimacy.

Therein lies the crux of Fiji politics; each social force that claims unilateral power for itself almost visibly struggles for a broader public consent, and cringes in the face of its unacceptability to one or other section of the community. That perpetual legitimacy crisis owes its origins to the 1987 coup; no subsequent elected government commanded a broad popular consensus. Rabuka's governments in the 1990s failed to do so. So did the short-lived Chaudhry administration of 1999–2001. And so it was also for Qarase, first after the 2000 coup, as the courts found his interim regime unconstitutional, and then, again, after 2001 when, despite election victory, the courts found his government unconstitutional because it failed to follow the power-sharing rules in the constitution. In the dying days of the 2001–2006 Qarase administration, that search for legitimacy remained visible, as the re-elected government – under the threat of impending military overthrow – sought to bolster and sanctify its legitimacy by vain appeals to the Great Council of Chiefs, and, although the response was disappointing, to the Office of the President.

Neither elections nor coups, then, enjoy enduring legitimacy in the Fijian political system. Nor do constitutions. Fiji has had three constitutions since independence (those of 1970, 1990 and 1997), and, owing to the legally precarious position of the post-January 2007 interim administration, there is now talk of a fourth. The extraordinary constitutional justifications of the commander, as relayed to the nation on 5 December and again on 5 January, the appeal to the 'doctrine of necessity' or various supposed 'reserve powers', seem destined to fall on deaf judicial ears, at least if these retain any semblance of independent authority. Yet, leaving aside the supposedly pristine legal debates, the political realities are clear enough. Fundamental rules and institutions in Fiji are accepted up to a point, but not if they threaten vested interests too directly or they deliver the 'wrong' outcome. Under these circumstances, principle counts for less than power. Mahendra Chaudhry, the prime minister overthrown in

the 2000 coup, is a minister in the military-backed interim government. The victim of one coup, Chaudhry is the beneficiary of another, back in power but through the agency of armed force rather than the popular vote.

Commitment to democracy and constitutionalism seem, then, to sit more lightly with Fiji's political leaders than the desire to reclaim a place at the top of Fiji's public life. That much was true also of the host of politicians who hoped to gain from Speight's coup in May 2000 or, perhaps more pragmatically, from the military takeover that superseded it. And the switch to serving the 2007 military government – for such it is in all but name – is all the easier for those who chose to participate in the Bainimarama-led cabinet because the December 2006 coup was undertaken in the name of anti-corruption. They claim to be a part of a clean-up campaign, sweeping away corruption, nepotism and inefficiency and to be acting in the national interest. But then all Fiji's coups have been justified by appeals to the greater good – the protection of 'indigenous rights' in the case of the 1987 and Speight coups, 'national security' in the case of the army's intervention on 29 May 2000, and, in December 2006, 'anti-corruption'. The labels may change but beneath lie the ambitions of individuals and groups who want political power and are not willing to wait for the cumbersome, and often messy and difficult, process of electoral democracy to get it.

Books about elections are habitually, and necessarily, about political parties, political deal-making, campaigns, candidates, platforms, policies, issues, the media, the role of women, voting systems, electoral boundaries, and regional political peculiarities. This book covers all these issues, but it also does more than that. It includes chapters by the major protagonists at the polls: Laisenia Qarase, the prime minister who won the election, and former opposition leader Mahendra Chaudhry, who lost and claimed it was tainted by ballot-rigging. That argument subsequently became a major part of the case of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces and, bizarre though that was, of the Fiji Human Rights Commission, which sought to justify the coup of December 2006. This book also addresses many of the unique nuances of Fiji politics: how Christian, Hindu and Muslim religious organizations responded to the election, the role of traditional chiefs, the regional peculiarities in electoral politics (in Rewa, Tailevu, Rotuma and Ba Province), the backwash of earlier events in Fiji's political history, especially the 2000 coup, and, most importantly, the campaign against the sitting government by the military commander, which

proved ultimately decisive in reversing the course seemingly set in stone by the 2006 election result.

We offer this book, then, as a study of a moment in time in the jagged course of Fiji's modern history. The contributors wrote their chapters before they could have known that the military would annul the election result. Their perspective, and no reproach is due to them for this, is inevitably from within the pre-coup democratic and constitutional order. We have not sought to revise those contributions. If those chapters turn out to be primarily of historical interest, so be it. They are no less important for that. But this book is also much more than an interpretation of past events, forgotten players or defeated social forces. Elections will return, and – at the time of writing – the political players examined in this book are already climbing back onto the stage, assuming positions in the interim order or staking out their claims and perspectives for the anticipated contests of the future, whether these be legal, political or ideological. The supposedly cathartic intervention of the military in government rests inherently on force, even if buttressed by the persuasive sirens of a 'clean-up campaign'. Legitimacy crises, which figure as such a perpetual accompaniment to the orchestra of Fiji politics, will not easily be discharged by gunpoint. And, as the absence of consensus makes its presence felt, the social forces, ideals and political players investigated in this book will resume their roles, no doubt in transfigured but still recognisable forms.

Fortunately, we had not gone to press when the commander of Fiji's military forces seized control in December 2006. So we were able to include several contributions to the interpretation of that enigmatic event, and the odd reconfiguration of Fiji politics that followed it. Robert Norton, in a postscript to his concluding chapter, asks whether the coup might prove a means of transcending ethnic divisions, although emphasising also the inherently coercive nature of military intervention. Jon Fraenkel has sought, in an addendum, to weigh and balance the initial conflicting interpretations of the December 2006 coup. Ours will not be the last word on Fiji's latest coup, and nor should it be. Here was a sufficiently perplexing event to warrant a host of analyses and investigations. We offer our own as a contribution to that ongoing debate, one buttressed and backgrounded by a far-reaching and detailed survey of that era when constitutional power-sharing was attempted as a productive way forward in the ever-turbulent history of post-independence Fiji.

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