

# **Tradition, Culture and Politics**



# 15. Keynote Address — Governance in Fiji: The interplay between indigenous tradition, culture and politics

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Commentators and observers alike have long decried the ethnic nature of politics in Fiji. It is seen as an obstacle to the creation of a more unified and cohesive society. Those concerns are well taken, however, the forces of history cast a long shadow over the present. For indigenous Fijians there is a constant struggle between embracing other communities and maintaining a distinct and separate identity. There is ambivalence about compromise. It is feared something is indelibly lost in that process. Fijian unity as an ideal is extolled and valued because it is perceived as the only way Fijians believe they can protect their 'Fijianness'. The reality is far more complex. But it provides a reassuring sanctuary against the challenges they face both individually and collectively.

British colonial rule in 1874 created the legacy we have today. The first Governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, established the Fijian Administration. It introduced a separate system of indirect rule by the British through the Fijian chiefs over their Fijian subjects. Having served as Governor of Mauritius, Gordon had no qualms about importing Indian indentured labour to plant cane for sugar production in order to finance the running of the nascent colony. The first labourers arrived in 1879 and the scheme continued until 1916, when it was ended, owing to widespread protests by Mohandas Gandhi among others.

The separation of Fijians from other ethnic communities was maintained until the abolition of the Native Regulations in 1967. They regulated the lives of Fijians in the villages and restricted their movement to and from the urban centres. From 1894 to 1963, the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* or Great Council of Chiefs nominated Fijian members to the Legislative Council. Only Fijians of chiefly rank occupied the positions of *Roko Tui*, or chief administrative official, of the 14 provinces of Fiji. In 1947 the first non-Fijian chief was appointed as *Roko Tui Tailevu*. In this decade, education began to be made available more widely. The return of Fijian soldiers from the Solomons campaign in World War II, and participation in the Malaya campaign against the Communists in the 1950s, broadened horizons beyond their villages as well. Only in 1963 were Fijians given the right to directly elect members to the Legislative Council.

With the arrival of the indentured labourers, the Fijian chiefs, while wary of these newcomers, were initially quiescent. However, as more of them chose to stay permanently and their numbers grew, coupled with the declining Fijian population as the result of measles and other epidemics, perceptions and responses changed. The Fijian chiefs became quite hostile to Indo-Fijian interests and concerns. There was little chance of the two communities making common cause against the Colonial Administration. When the Indo-Fijian population exceeded that of the Fijians in the mid-1930s, that merely stoked Fijian fears further. Moreover, they had differing attitudes towards the British rulers. Indo-Fijians had suffered greatly under indenture, whereas the Fijian experience of the British was largely benign if highly regulated.

In establishing the Fijian Administration, Sir Arthur Gordon further wished to preserve and protect Fijian society, as he saw it, in its natural state. Progress should move at a pace Fijians could absorb without harming their way of life. This approach suited the Fijian chiefs because it reinforced their status. The communal nature of their social organisation, and the overarching structure of the Fijian Administration, instilled in Fijians a clannish perspective. While there were undercurrents, and notable figures such as Apolosi R. Nawai who challenged the status quo, the Fijian chiefs presented a united front to the Colonial Administration. Their interests were asserted as uniform and inseparable. Consensus among Fijians papered over the misgivings and dissent which some might have had. A strong sense of cohesion and reluctance to question, for fear of being set apart, kept Fijians together. It was no surprise that, with the autonomy given the colony in the decade before independence, Fijian leaders established a political party to protect and advance Fijian interests. Other communities were welcome to join as allied associations, but the emphasis was never in doubt.

Until his death in 1958, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna was the seminal influence and voice on matters regarding the Fijian people. Sukuna had the right bloodlines. He was the best-educated Fijian in his time. Sukuna was a war hero. He was mannered in the way the English loved. The British Colonial Administration found him useful as an interlocutor for the Fijian people. Sukuna himself was not averse to manipulating the British Colonial Administration to protect what he regarded as Fijian prerogatives: retention of the traditional system by preserving the Fijian way of life in the villages. Democracy was envisaged as a destination a long way off. In the interim, Sukuna, together with others of like mind and chiefly background, would play guide. The paramountcy of Fijian interests reflected in the protection of land, customs and culture was the central tenet of this vision. The priorities set by Sukuna would be pursued by his political heirs; Ratu (later) Sir Kamisese Mara was groomed by Sukuna to succeed him.

It is generally thought that the British were acquiescent in the political developments leading to eventual independence in 1970. Far from it. They were very concerned with how matters transpired. From the late 1950s, Whitehall had hoped that multi-ethnic politics would gradually emerge. They underestimated the strength of Fijian feeling in the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* and among elected Fijian Legislative Council Members. Neither would countenance a single electoral roll and open seats. Seats in the Legislative Council for the first general elections in 1966 for self-government were allocated on ethnic lines. This pattern was to persist after independence. Although we now have open seats under the 1997 Constitution, ethnically based seats still constitute the majority in the elected House of Representatives. Neither of the two significant political parties advocates any change and reform in the current electoral arrangements. If anything, the governing Fijian party has indicated that there should be more Fijian representation based on population changes.

Self-government and independence were determined by a relatively small group of people. In the case of the Fijian people, they trusted their leaders, and particularly the prominent chiefs of the time, including Mara, to make the right decisions. Many accepted those developments only because of their leaders. The assumption was that they as a community would always wield political power. Their leaders understood full well this outcome was premised on Fijian unity. It was believed, somewhat arrogantly, that this was almost immutable. Fijians themselves were superficially familiar with the process of elections and of having a law-making body of their representatives. However, it was a quantum leap to imagine that governments of a Fijian complexion could be removed. The possibility existed only in their worst nightmares. It was also easily manipulated by opportunist elements to foment political unrest. A mix of those factors occurred in 1987. What little understanding there was of the democratic process was overwhelmed by nationalist sentiment.

Fijian leaders from Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara to Rabuka to Qarase have largely encouraged ethnic Fijians to be united. Dr Timoci Bavadra has been the exception. He believed in a multicultural and multi-ethnic country. His colleagues for their part saw Fijians as forming the centre around which other communities would cohere. What is the basis for this unity? It is in a sense a circling of the wagons, of drawing the *laager* together. This is the rationale. There are only 400,000 Fijians on this planet. Who will protect them if they cannot stand together? No one. They will be divided and all that they hold sacrosanct will be forfeit: their land, their culture and traditions, their language, their very soul. Only if Fijians held political power as an ethnic group could their rights and interests be secure. These perceptions continue to be held by a significant number of Fijians. They resonate more than any current constitutional safeguards. These beliefs are continually reinforced by their chiefs, non-traditional leaders and the clergy, and are endorsed in discourse among ordinary Fijians.

Fijians have a strong sense of identity. They pride themselves on knowing who they are and where they come from. Urbanisation has eroded these sentiments only slightly. In recent times it has become tinged with some sense of bewilderment and confusion. The emergence of disparate interests and discordant voices appears very troubling. There is no shortage of speculation about the possible causes. It is attributed to indiscipline, disloyalty, defiance of authority, arrogance and opportunism. It is easy to forget that these islands were a collection of warring and contending *vanua* or chiefdoms before cession in 1874. The British imposed a unity on the country that had never existed before. Our sense of nationhood dates back only to that time. In this more open environment, some divisions are re-emerging. That need not be feared but should be considered in a historical context. In May 2000, the provinces which were largely the centres of unrest were Naitasiri, Northern Tailevu and parts of Macuata and Cakaudrove. Much of the unrest concerned perceptions of marginalisation and underdevelopment. These divisions appear to be a consequence of social change whether caused by urbanisation, rising levels of education, the rural-urban divide or the emergence of interests based on economic groupings.

Much has been said about the Fijian traditional system and the regard Fijians have for their chiefs. There is a lot said and written about the authority exercised by those leaders. When one peers beneath the surface, there have been profound changes and more are in store. Fijians among themselves tend to adopt a more ambivalent view, which they will not necessarily share openly. It generates a sense of disloyalty to be looking askance at their own. However, there is increasing recognition that any leader, be they chief or commoner, needs to have some education and means, because that is the measure by which success and standing are reckoned in contemporary society. It is no longer sufficient just to have the right bloodlines. It is an issue of credibility. The focus on inter-ethnic relations has often disguised the erosion of chiefly authority and the more questioning attitude of Fijians. These developments are being played out even as national issues are debated and considered. This is most evident in the media and in the attitudes of young urbanised Fijians, who seem more taken with globalised youth culture. The result has been the rise of more populist Fijian leaders having less inclination to compromise sectarian interests.

The period of leadership of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau covered the first 30 years of independence. It was common to see this as the continuation of chiefly leadership. In a sense it was an illusion. For while these two towering figures dwelt at the apex, the pyramid was actually made up of far more educated Fijians of non-chiefly rank. This was not what Sukuna envisaged, for he wished to preserve the role of the chiefs. The broadening of educational opportunities, and the inability of chiefly families to exploit and make use of their initial advantages, have altered the balance decisively. The process occurred gradually but inexorably. Bavadra, Rabuka, Chaudhry and

now Qarase demonstrate that political power has passed to career politicians. Chiefs wishing to participate in politics must do so on equal terms with others. There is no prior right of leadership and to that extent democratic norms have taken root.

Most problematic have been Fijian attitudes to the rule of law. I have said elsewhere that the concept is little understood by Fijians. They see their rights as indigenous people as existing outside and above the law. Those attitudes incline them to break the law whenever they feel their rights are under threat. That in itself is a dangerous assumption because it allows whoever is strongest to make the rules. It was the rule of the club that Ratu Cakobau and other high chiefs surrendered to Queen Victoria in return for the rule of law and civilisation. One cannot have it both ways. To that end, Fijian leaders need to be open and direct with their people. They cannot be seen to be encouraging them to break the law when it suits them, and enforcing the law when it comes to expiring tenancies and leases. Fijians themselves need to be more questioning of those who would invoke indigenous rights as a rallying cry for disaffection and defiance of authority whenever it suits. While their fears and insecurities might be real, too often they are open to manipulation and exploitation.

It is interesting to chart the movement of moderate Fijian opinion since the first coup in May 1987. It generated a strong sense of nationalist feeling among ordinary Fijians from across the social spectrum. Post-1987 the concept of indigenous rights has been asserted with increasing confidence. Before that, it was trumpeted only by ardent nationalists. Yet to those who were taken by surprise by the outpouring of sentiment following that first coup, those concepts lie close to the surface. They always have. Part of the problem is that we do not listen intently enough to each other. The attempted coup of 2000 encouraged and justified the present government's initiatives to further advantage Fijians. The blueprint prescribing ambitious incentives for narrowing the margin between Fijians and others in a number of fields, and the *Qoliqoli* Bill, which extends proprietary rights to traditional owners of fisheries, were presented as palliatives to help assuage nationalist sentiment. While the blueprint broadened affirmative action extant since independence, no previous government had felt confident enough to legislate fishing rights. It had been mooted since the earliest days of independence and raised in the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* continually since the late 19th century. It was a telling reflection of the movement of moderate Fijian opinion to the right because there appeared to be widespread support for it among Fijians.

The upheavals of May 2000 were far more divisive and traumatic than the coups in 1987. No longer was there consensus in the Fijian community. Certain Indo-Fijians were subjected to acts of violence and thuggery the likes of which one hopes never to witness again. Reconciliation and forgiveness have been

vexed questions ever since. Fijians have drawn on their customs and traditions as well as their Christian heritage to initiate the process. One does not doubt the sincerity of the gesture. Neither does one question the need for some kind of healing that allows the nation to bind up its wounds. However, if reconciliation is to be meaningful, cathartic and all embracing, it has to be in a language everyone can speak: an engagement in which all can be involved. Anything less would be demeaning and diminishing. Unless all are part of the process, it is difficult to see how the nation can come to terms with its past hurts and pain.

As we move into the future, the issues of national identity and language remain unresolved. Because it is considered a sensitive issue, it is not discussed widely by either our leaders or the country at large. We are a multicultural and multi-religious nation. There is as yet no consensus on how we deal with these concerns. I am comfortable with the teaching of Fijian and Hindustani in school, however, our character ought to be shaped by the region of which we are part, and the spirit of the indigenous people who first inhabited our islands. I do not say that out of chauvinism, more out of a sense of trying to find an appropriate point around which we can rally. Why should that be the choice? The indigenous people are the host culture, they own most of the land and they are half the population. But most importantly, we are a Pacific people. Is identity important in a globalised world where there are seemingly no borders? Yes. It will remain so if only because people will increasingly need to take comfort and find assurance in the familiar.

Those thoughts require greater discussion and reflection, however, they would probably be given short shrift if mooted by Fijian politicians. Given their experiences, their upbringing and their mind-set, most find it genuinely difficult to conceive of all the ethnic communities collectively in terms of 'us'. The discourse is always 'us' and 'them', particularly in relation to Indo-Fijians. So, were any of them, with few exceptions, to make such proposals, the other communities would simply regard that as Fijian racism. Although Fijians tend to be more open-minded in relation to political choices within their own community, their Fijian political parties approach national issues in ethnic terms. Considering broader alternatives is not an option when one's perspectives are reinforced by others at every turn. There is a very real fear of leaving the fold to embrace multi-ethnic perspectives. Such straitjacket perspectives do not augur well for the future of multi-ethnic politics.

Religion reinforces these attitudes. The Methodist Church is totally Fijianised. It preaches a theology that makes little or no attempt to bridge the ethnic divide. A Fijian gloss has been put on the Christian message that provides justification for political developments since 1987. The newer Christian churches, which have their roots in American evangelical Christianity, have complemented the role of the Methodist Church in promoting an exclusionary approach which

distinguishes between those within the fold and those outside. Such certainties leave little room for interfaith or any dialogue and merely widen our differences. In this context, the concept of a Christian state is not a new theme in our history. It has, however, gathered strength in recent years from the position of the Methodist Church and the stance of the newer denominations. To put this issue in perspective, the Methodist elders are more concerned with form than substance. Any such initiative, however well intended, would be divisive and dangerous. It is unacceptable in principle and would, in any case, be open to abuse.

Relations with the Indo-Fijian community remain a vexed issue. While interpersonal relations are generally good, members of both communities retain a guarded wariness about each other. Politicians reflect these emotions from time to time. Fijian politicians continue to remain distrustful of their Indo-Fijian counterparts. Part of the problem is that it is doubtful whether any Fijian leader has made any real and genuine effort to engage with and understand Indo-Fijians in all their complexity. The same can be said in reverse. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara did try but it was coloured by his private reservations that were shaped by his upbringing. He nursed a real sense of hurt and anger at the defeat of his Alliance Party in April 1987. It mattered not that it was a small number of Fijians voting for the opposition which caused the result, or that he had been misled by close Indo-Fijian confidants who had little support or credibility in their own community. Such deep-rooted emotions can be overcome only by sustained and meaningful dialogue and engagement.

Colonial rule, entrenchment of Fijian chiefly structures and the Indo-Fijian presence resulted in the evolution of communal politics grounded in notions of Fijian identity. In the transition to independence and subsequently, there was little recognition or understanding by Fijians of the full implications of democracy. The commitments made by Fijian decision makers, in political settlements with other communities, were not necessarily shared by their people. The coups of 1987 and upheavals of 2000 appear to have borne that proposition out. Fijian leaders will need to consult more closely with the Fijian community to ensure they are conversant and comfortable with what is mooted. But they also owe it to the country to develop a vision that is inclusive and truly multicultural in character. It has to be more than a motley group of communities that merely accept a role secondary to the assertion of indigenous interests; rather, it has to be a genuine partnership where all feel they have the opportunity and the space to play a meaningful part in the deliberations about how the nation is governed. We owe that to our children, and to generations as yet unborn, so that the future is not a mere repetition of our past.

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