

Afterword

The 1970 independence constitution, whose formulation had so exercised the minds of officials in London and Suva during the previous decade, was tested on several occasions and lasted 17 years. It was overthrown in the military coup of 1987. Its overthrow was not a surprise, for the assumptions and understandings that underpinned the constitution, and the political culture of racial compartmentalisation which it had spawned, had been shaken rudely by the social and economic changes sweeping Fiji in the decades after independence.¹

The first post-independence elections took place in 1972. The Alliance Party, under Ratu Mara's leadership, won easily, capturing 33 seats to the Federation Party's 19. The status quo was maintained. A Fijian party, with a Fijian leader, was at the helm of national leadership, just as the framers of the constitution had envisaged. The two major ethnic groups voted predictably along racial lines, as the race-based electoral system encouraged them to do. The Alliance received 83 per cent of the Fijian communal votes and the Federation Party 75 per cent of the Indo-Fijian votes. Some 2 per cent of Fijians voted for the Federation Party while 24 per cent of Indo-Fijians voted for the Alliance. This was the first and the last time the Alliance would enjoy such encouraging Indo-Fijian support.

As the 1970s progressed, problems began to surface, emanating directly from the racially polarised nature of Fiji's political system. Many Indo-Fijians in the Alliance felt that the party — solidly backed by the Fijians — cared little for their concerns. The government's affirmative action programs in favour of the indigenous community left many disenchanted, as did the dwindling opportunities for Indo-Fijians in the public sector. Some of the formerly staunch Indo-Fijian supporters of the Alliance began to drift towards the National Federation Party. Sections of the Fijian community were also disenchanted with the Alliance government. They felt that the Alliance was unduly pro-Indo-Fijian and favoured the prime minister's own maritime province (Lau) at the expense of other largely neglected areas of Fiji, especially in parts of Viti Levu. They found their champion in Sakiasi Butadroka, formerly of the Alliance, who broke with the party in 1975 to form his own Fijian Nationalist Party, whose founding motto was 'Fiji for the Fijians'.

The politics of moderation under a Fijian leadership, which the Alliance had sought to foster, failed partly because of some of the misconceived policies of the government and partly because of the culture of ethnic polarisation that a racially based electoral system encouraged. Ethnic loyalty rather than secular ideology permeated the thinking of the leaders and the electorate. The first test of the 1970 constitution came in the April 1977 elections. In that election, Butadroka's Nationalist Party won 24 per cent of the Fijian communal votes,

enough to cause the downfall of the Alliance, which won 24 seats to the Federation Party's 26. The remaining two went to an independent and to a Nationalist.

The unthinkable had happened. The majority Fijian party, with a high chief as its leader, had lost the elections, while an Indo-Fijian party had 'won'. In fact, strictly speaking, the Federation Party had won exactly half of the 52 seats; to form government, it needed the support of the independents, which was not forthcoming. More seriously, the Federation Party was divided over leadership, over who should be selected to be prime minister. As the party deliberated the issue over several days, the Governor-General, Ratu Sir George Cakobau, 'acting in his own deliberate judgement', appointed Ratu Mara as minority prime minister. He did so, he said, because he had evidence — allegedly from Federation Party sources (who denied any involvement on oath) — that Mara was the leader most likely to command majority support in the House of Representatives. Cakobau's judgement, however, was constitutionally fraught: the issue was for the House of Representatives to decide, not for the Governor-General to pre-empt. He did it anyway, returning Fiji to a Fijian leader, using the Federation Party's delay as his excuse.

The minority Mara government fell shortly afterwards, paving the way for elections in September. The months between the elections restored a sense of 'normalcy' to the political scene. That is, the Alliance re-established its hold on the Fijian constituency. The realisation that splitting the Fijian votes might hand power to an Indo-Fijian party — an anathema at all times — was enough to return many Fijians to the Alliance fold. It won 36 seats and captured 81 per cent of the Fijian communal votes, though only 14 per cent of the Indo-Fijian votes. The Fijian Nationalist Party failed to win a seat. On the other side, the Federation Party fractured into two warring factions — the Dove and the Flower — splitting the Indo-Fijian vote and winning only 15 seats.

The 1977 elections held several lessons for Fiji's political leaders, none more important than the realisation that if the Fijians wanted to retain power, they would have to remain united politically. The lesson was not lost on Mara. According to several of his closest Indo-Fijian colleagues in the Alliance Party, his first priority after the elections was to rally the Fijians behind him and his party, increasingly paying lip-service to the party's multiracial philosophy. Most of the founding Indo-Fijian members of the Alliance began leaving the party to join the Federation Party. The logic of the electoral system reinforced the need for ethnic solidarity in one's own constituency while splitting one's opponents', and leaders of both major parties played the game accordingly. Ethnic divisions were hardening.

Once again, the general elections of 1982 tested the underlying assumptions of the constitution. While the Alliance Party's Indo-Fijian base had slipped

considerably, the Federation Party tried to expand its Fijian support, not through direct membership but by forming a coalition with a regional Fijian party, the Western United Front. The final result was close. The Alliance won 28 seats and the Federation Party 24 — a far cry from its form only five years earlier. Both ethnic communities rallied behind their respective parties. The closeness of the anticipated result caused much heat and acrimony, with prophecies of doom for Fijians if the Federation Party ever came to power, endangering their land rights and threatening their other vital interests. Soon after the election, calls went up to reject the 1970 constitution and have it replaced with one that guaranteed Fijian political control in perpetuity, giving the Fijians all the most important portfolios in government.

'Race,' Ratu Mara was fond of saying, '[was] a fact of life in Fiji'. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, it had become one among many facts of life in Fiji, and was losing its salience in the daily life of most ordinary citizens. A rapidly expanding cash economy was changing the face of the rural landscape. Urban centres attracted thousands from the countryside; squatter settlements fringed the major towns. Poverty levels increased and the spectre of unemployment began to stalk the country. Travel and technology and a rapidly expanding tertiary education sector were introducing new ideas and values that questioned old habits of thought. The net effect of these developments was the acceleration of social change cutting across the barriers of race. Its political manifestation was the formation, in 1985, of a multiracial Fiji Labour Party (FLP) headed by Dr Timoci Bavadra. Two years later, it teamed up with the Federation Party to contest the 1987 general elections; a fateful decision, as it transpired, because it signalled to Fijian nationalists that the FLP was 'on the same side' as the overwhelmingly Indo-Fijian Federation Party. The Coalition ended the Alliance Party's 21-year reign by winning 28 seats in the 52-seat House of Representatives.

The elections also disrupted the conventional calculus of Fijian politics. A Fijian-dominated party, representing the Fijian establishment, was defeated. The number of Fijians voting for the Coalition was small, fewer than 10 per cent; 77 per cent of the Fijians voted for the Alliance, and 83 per cent of Indo-Fijians for the National Federation Party. The shift was slight, but the fear of the spreading of the trend of non-racial voting challenged conventional thinking about the operation of politics in Fiji. Fijians used to seeing their high chiefs at the helm of national leadership were reluctant to accept the new government even though it was headed by an indigenous Fijian, albeit of a less-exalted status than his predecessor. Politicians piqued by loss of office manipulated the fears of the ethnic Fijians to derail the new government. A month later, on 14 May, the Coalition government was overthrown in a military coup led by Sitiveni Rabuka.

An interim administration ruled the country from 1987 to 1992. One of its principal tasks was to devise a new constitution to replace the abrogated 1970 constitution. The new constitution it recommended removed multiracial voting altogether, taking the country back two decades. Of the 71 seats in the proposed House of Representatives, 37 were allocated to Fijians, 27 to Indo-Fijians and the remainder to 'others'. Of the 37 Fijian seats, 32 were to be contested from rural constituencies and only five from urban ones even though, by the early 1990s, more than 40 per cent of the indigenous Fijians lived in urban areas. The framers of the constitution hoped that the electoral arrangements would reinforce ethnic Fijian solidarity, the slippage of which had cost Fijians the national leadership. The urban Fijians who had voted for Labour were marginalised in the new electoral arrangement.

To promote Fijian political unity, the Great Council of Chiefs launched an exclusively Fijian party, the *Soqosoqo Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT) in 1992, as an umbrella organisation for Fijians of all political persuasions. Predictably, the hope of ethnic unity was short lived. The first tensions erupted over the leadership of the party. Some Fijians preferred a high chief as leader to give the new organisation authority and prestige, while others wanted a secret ballot to decide who the leader should be. Rabuka, who was not a chief, won the presidency of the party handily, much to the disappointment of the more traditional members of the establishment who soon afterwards broke away to form their own political party, the Fijian Association Party, with the support of Ratu Mara, whose dismissive attitude to Rabuka was public knowledge. Rabuka's Fijian opponents brought about his government's defeat on the floor of the House in 1994, but he won government in the elections that followed and remained prime minister until 1999.

By then it was abundantly clear that Fijian political unity was an evanescent dream. Later in the decade, political fragmentation was the most prominent feature of indigenous Fijian politics. Class and regional calculations came to the fore. The departure from the national scene of paramount chiefs — who had wielded unquestioned political power in the postwar period — opened up space for other aspirants. The substantial decline of the Indo-Fijian population after the 1987 coups lessened the fear of 'Indian domination', which had been an important factor in forging Fijian political unity. By the late 1990s, the political and intellectual underpinnings of the 1970 constitution were demonstrably irrelevant.

It was in the midst of all these changes and transformations that the Fiji Constitution Review Commission was appointed by parliament to review the contested 1990 constitution, in accordance with the provision for a review seven years after its promulgation. Two fundamental questions — which had long plagued Fiji — confronted the commission as it began its task. One was how

best to protect the interests of the Fijian community, or the ‘paramountcy of Fijian interests’. The second was how to enlarge the space in the political system for non-racial politics. The commission recommended that the Great Council of Chiefs be recognised in the constitution, complete with its own secretariat to help protect its independence and autonomy. Further, all the legislative provisions pertaining to Fijian interests — land ownership, customary titles and so on — should continue to be guaranteed. In short, matters of deep concern to the indigenous community should be removed from the arena of electoral politics. Regarding the promotion of non-racial democracy, the commission recommended that Fiji should move away gradually but decisively from a race-based electoral system. Forty-six of 71 seats should be contested on open, non-racial rolls and the remaining on a racially allocated basis though only for a temporary period. The way forward for Fiji, the commission believed, was through genuine multi-ethnic cooperation rather than through ethnic compartmentalisation.

The Parliamentary Select Committee appointed to scrutinise the report of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission and make the final recommendations to the parliament for a new constitution reversed the commission’s electoral recommendations. It recommended that 46 seats should be racially reserved for the three communities indefinitely, and the remaining 25 seats contested on a non-racial basis. The parliament that approved the final constitution comprised members elected on racial rolls prescribed by the 1990 constitution. Having entered parliament through a racially segregated electoral system, and having spent their entire careers in racially compartmentalised politics, members of parliament resisted taking the bold step in the direction of non-racialism that the commission recommended. The 25 open seats were a start, but the 46 racially reserved seats meant that Fiji was still tethered to its racial past. There was one ameliorating feature of the constitution that sought to mitigate the deleterious effects of ethnically polarised politics. It was the provision that any political party with more than 10 per cent of seats in the House of Representatives — that is, eight or more members — was constitutionally entitled to be invited to serve in cabinet. The route to parliament was, however, still through a dominantly racial electoral system.

When Mahendra Chaudhry’s Labour-led People’s Coalition won the 1999 elections, the Fijian nationalists once again played the race card against an ‘Indian-dominated’ government. The coup that overthrew this government on 19 May 2000 was essentially about the distribution of power within the indigenous community, but race was mobilised to depose the government. Every legislative agenda the government proposed — from land use to its forest policy — was viewed and assessed through a racial lens. Racial prejudice fostered by a racial electoral system over the decades came to the fore and was manipulated to the full by the supporters of the coup. Chaudhry defended his government on the basis that it had a mandate from the people, given to it through a

democratic election. The government did not, however, have a mandate from the Fijian people, the majority of whom voted for Fijian parties. Race remained central, too, in the elections of 2001, which followed the intervention of the army and the installation of an interim government under Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. His new party, the *Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua* (SDL), was dedicated to unifying indigenous Fijians, and he received their overwhelming support at the ballot box — enough to keep him in power for the next five years with a policy aimed at favouring the indigenous population at the expense of the Indo-Fijians.

The 2006 general elections produced a result that would have pleased officials at the 1960s Colonial Office. A democratically elected government, with an indigenous Fijian at its head, was in power under a constitution supported widely throughout the community. Even more, for the first time in Fiji's history, a genuinely multi-ethnic government was in place, thanks to the power-sharing provision of the constitution. With the Fijian population nearing 60 per cent and the Indo-Fijian population about 37 per cent, Fijian fears of Indian domination were diminishing. A demographic transition was finally producing the result that had preoccupied policy makers in Suva and London for so long.

Just when 'victory' seemed within sight, however, Commodore Frank Bainimarama executed Fiji's fourth coup and removed Qarase's SDL government from power. For the first time, neither race nor the protection of Fijian rights were at issue in a Fijian coup; the removal of a government reported to be riddled with corruption and variously patronising individuals implicated in George Speight's coup was advertised as the key reason. The military-backed Interim Administration is intent on remaining in power for some time. One of its stated intentions is to review the constitution to remove all vestiges of racial voting. If it succeeds, it will have executed a fundamental constitutional revolution; but it is too early to tell either whether this goal will be achieved or what the outcome of doing so will be.

The role of traditional Fijian institutions in the public life of Fiji — in particular that of the Great Council of Chiefs — was a major preoccupation of the policy makers in Suva and London on the eve of independence. In the 1970 constitution, the Great Council of Chiefs was given the power of veto over all legislation that even remotely affected Fijian interests and concerns. After independence, the Great Council of Chiefs continued to be consulted on issues of importance not only to the indigenous community but to the nation as a whole. Its voice carried weight. The 1997 constitution recognised the Great Council of Chiefs as a constitutional entity in the expectation that it would become the guardian of the national interest as well. After the 2006 coup, however, the Great Council of Chiefs was humiliated symbolically by the military when it was rudely sidelined and silenced. Its membership was suspended when it refused to endorse

the military's nominee for vice-president. The military wants a much narrower social and cultural role for the Great Council of Chiefs, chiefly as a voice of the indigenous community, and not much more. If it succeeds in its efforts to redefine a subordinate national role for the Great Council of Chiefs, the military will have executed yet another coup of far-reaching significance for Fijian public life.

The issues that preoccupied decision makers in London and Suva in the 1960s continued to haunt Fiji in its post-independence years. The entrenchment of a racial system of voting — which the Fijians and Europeans demanded, almost as a precondition for further moves towards internal self-government and eventually independence, and which the Colonial Office endorsed, albeit reluctantly — in time became the principal cause of Fiji's political problems, derailing its fragile democracy. A time bomb did indeed lie buried at the heart of Fiji's independence constitution.

ENDNOTES

¹ Since this is a small survey, I thought it unnecessary to have it documented like the rest of the text. For readers seeking more details of the picture portrayed here, I refer them to my published and easily accessible works: *Broken Waves: A history of the Fiji Islands in the 20th century* (1992), *Another Way: The politics of constitutional reform in post-coup Fiji* (1997) and *Islands of Turmoil: Elections and politics in Fiji* (2006).