

CHAPTER 2: BAPTISM BY FIRE

*Where has the tree gone that locked
Earth to the sky? What is under my hands that I cannot feel?*

Philip Larkin

Jai Ram Reddy was appointed to the Senate in 1972 by Siddiq Koya, which he accepted after some months of private deliberation. His term in the Senate was unremarkable, certainly in contrast to what was to follow in the late 1970s. He was, for the most part, an interested bystander, not an active participant, in Indo-Fijian politics and had no ambition for a political career, let alone political leadership of the Indo-Fijian community. Law was his passion not politics. But given his reputation and status as a leading barrister and his cultural background, it was inevitable that he would be drafted into politics sooner or later, whether he liked it or not. It turned out to be sooner rather than later. Reddy was thrust into national prominence in the April 1977 general elections and was caught in the whirlpool of chaos that followed in the National Federation Party. It was not an especially happy or productive time for him in politics. The 1970s were a dark time for the National Federation Party, whose public quarrels about leadership and other matters of no lasting significance split the party and bitterly divided the Indo-Fijian community from which it took a very long time to recover. For some, the wounds are still raw beneath the surface, more than thirty years later. Getting the party's house in order and introducing a semblance of unity and purposefulness to its work would consume virtually all of Reddy's energies in these unhappily wasted years. This chapter revisits the old battlegrounds of Indo-Fijian politics of the 1970s, the issues over which pitched battles were fought, the fractured legacy they produced

which Reddy inherited during the early part of his political career, and the manner in which he tried to heal the wounds of the past. The contentious debates over race and land which so dominated the political landscape of the 1970s would continue to hobble effective political dialogue well into the next decade and beyond. In different forms and to different degrees, they are still with us more than three decades later.

THE INDEPENDENCE DECADE: DECLINE

The independence decade did not begin well for the NFP. The purposeful cohesiveness which had characterized the party in the 1960s was evaporating. Then, the NFP set the agenda for debate on the most important challenges facing the country: the terms and conditions of independence, the reforms in the sugar industry, the nature of economic development desirable and appropriate for Fiji, national identity and cultural preservation. It was a party of ideas and vision and viewed widely as a worthy and respected opponent of the ruling Alliance Party. In the 1970s, however, the NFP was reduced to a pale shadow of its former self, bereft of ideas, squabbling, often at war with itself, and with all its energies consumed by internal strife, unable to perform effectively on the national stage as a government-in-waiting. Siddiq Koya's top-down leadership style came in for criticism less than a year after independence. In June 1971, Abhay Awasthi, an important party functionary in Suva, circulated a paper for internal discussion in which he outlined the party's weak spots.¹ 'The main weakness is in the leadership of the party,' the paper began. 'The President [Koya] has failed to maintain the dignity — standard — quality control of the party's machinery. This is an intolerable failure and accounts for the highest percentage of decline — frustration and weakening of party spirit among the rank and file of the membership. The past procedures and precedents have been totally ignored.' The party secretariat was 'almost defunct.' Then there was the 'negligence on the part of most of our members of Parliament.' 'The neglect of their constituents constitutes is not only the breach of faith deposited with them but a clear fraud of the constituency allowances they draw for services they

should render to the electors they represent,' the paper said. The ordinary party members themselves were to blame to some extent because 'we have petted our leaders too much for too long — we have been too lenient on them — we left the destiny of the party solely in their hands. There was no check on their activities.'

In March 1972, RD Patel, AD Patel's younger brother, the party's Treasurer and member for the Ba communal constituency, reportedly resigned but kept it a secret 'in the interests of the party.' He would formally resign from the NFP in 1975 in disagreement with Koya over his proposal for a compulsory deduction of \$2.50 per ton for the Sugar Price Stabilization Fund, about which more later. A few months later, Karam Ramrakha, the stormy petrel and intellectually agile General Secretary of the party, resigned briefly after a failed attempt to challenge Koya's leadership, admitting to being 'outdone, outmanoeuvred and useless,'² and saying: 'We are faced with false festivals, false forums and false facades which conceal the real basic problem' which was that the NFP seemed 'doomed to eternal opposition because of voting patterns which showed little signs of change.'³ Koya dismissed the challenge as 'normal happening' in a democratic party, but as he would discover a few years later, the matter was not as simple as that. 'Under the late Mr AD Patel,' wrote Ahmed Ali, historian and later an Alliance parliamentarian and cabinet minister, 'the party had always displayed a united front — his personality dominated all; Koya seemed to lack Patel's stature, magnetism and authority.'⁴ Nonetheless, as Pramod Rae points out, despite all the dissatisfaction with Koya's style, there was no challenge to his leadership in the parliamentary caucus until 1977.⁵

The confusions and divisions were evident as the party prepared for Fiji's first post-independence general elections in 1972. Factions developed as those not selected as candidate aired their displeasure in public, not for the last time in the party's history, as will be seen later. 'Its past was undermined,' Ali wrote, 'and the differences of the leaders infect their supporters who, in certain cases, put loyalty to their patron above loyalty to the party.' RD Patel did not want Koya to campaign in his Ba constituency while Koya

kept Patel out of Lautoka. Preoccupied with debilitating internal friction, the NFP entered the campaign unprepared. It offered the electorate an unbelievably fanciful basket of promises: immediate water supplies to all areas, free and compulsory education up to at least two years of secondary school, free medical services, old age pension, a social security system and a new shipping line, the abolition of the basic tax and the nationalization of the gold mine along with the promise to make Fiji a republic with an elected Fijian head of state. It was what the *Fiji Times* chief-of-staff, John Carter, called a perfect example of 'impulsive populism.' Promises had to be made; it was the way things were done in elections; but no one took them seriously, or indeed in this case could take them seriously, including probably the party leaders themselves.

The NFP made the tall promises knowing very well that they would not come to power anyway, and many did not think Koya was a credible alternative Prime Minister. Ahmed Ali again (and I quote him because he was one of the few who wrote extensively about the elections): 'SM Koya seemed to have lost his former lustre. Even his followers were disgruntled; some found him ineffectual, others branded him an autocrat, and the die-hards could not forgive him the compromises of bi-partisanship [during the independence negotiations]. He failed to convince the Fijians and the Europeans that he was a suitable alternative Prime Minister.' The contrast with Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was stark. The Alliance leader, once reticent and shy and uncertain of his moves, had grown visibly in confidence since assuming power in late 1967 as Chief Minister, making him 'an attractive personality drawing all races towards him. He seemed to generate trust and hope.' International accolade and many honorary degrees confirmed his steadily growing stature at home and abroad. Even those who disagreed with the Alliance found its leader appealing.

The Alliance won the elections comfortably, capturing thirty three of the fifty two seats in the House of Representatives to the NFP's 19. The Alliance's hold on the Fijian constituency was strengthened, from 67 per cent in 1966 to 83 per cent in 1972. The Indian communal vote for the

NFP slipped from 78 per cent in 1968 to 75 per cent in 1972. More worrying for the party, nearly 24 per cent Indo-Fijians voted for the Alliance. The Indo-Fijians in the Alliance were not, as they said, *Changu Mangu*, hoi polloi, but people of credibility and stature in their own community, such as Kishore Govind, a future high court judge, Sir Vijay R Singh, MT Khan, James Shankar Singh, Manikam Pillay, the last four serving in the Alliance cabinet for various periods of time. Other supporters outside parliament included businessmen YP Reddy and Mahendra Motibhai Patel, the Jadurams of Labasa, Faiz Sherani, president of the Fiji Muslim League, transport magnate Shreedhar Maharaj, President of the large Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji, the powerful Mishra clan, the Deokis and many others like them, and many leading lights of the Arya Samaj as well. The Indian Alliance clearly comprised an influential group of people.

Some knew which side of the bread was buttered, so to speak, and prided themselves on their pragmatism about how to get ahead, while there were many who genuinely believed in the Alliance's multiracial philosophy and promise, among them James Shankar Singh. This was the height of Indo-Fijian support for the Alliance party, the highest percentage of Indian communal votes it would ever get, along with the best calibre of candidates it would put up in elections. Before the decade was over, all the leading lights of the Indian Alliance would leave the party for a variety of reasons, including dissatisfaction with Ratu Mara's leadership and his gradual pro-Fijian tilt, and heading, again for a variety of reasons, to the fold of the National Federation Party and later, from there, to the Fiji Labour Party.

The NFP's dismal performance among Fijians – winning only a paltry 2 per cent of the total communal votes – was expected, but still disappointing. It had hoped for a much better result, placing hope in the merger of Apisai Tora's and Isikeli Nadalo's National Democratic Party with the Federation in 1969 through the much-touted 'Operation Taukei' to attract more Fijians, but without success. (The original Taukei Movement, Reddy once quipped, was the creation of the Federation Party!) The initiative was no challenge to the Fijian Association whose infrastructure and influence

reached out to the furthest villages in Fiji. Ratu Julian Toganivalu and Ratu Mosese Varasikete were eminent, highly educated Fijian members, along with Ro Asela Logavatu, but they were all chiefs without followers among their own people, and no match at all for Ratu Mara and the other paramount chiefs (Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu George Cakobau, Ratu Penaia Ganilau) who were the pillars of the Fijian establishment and tutored by the departing British for national political leadership. How to penetrate the Fijian heartland, firmly in the control of Fijian institutions such as the Great Council of Chiefs and the Methodist Church, would be one of the greatest challenges Reddy would face during his time at the helm of the National Federation Party, a challenge which would lead him eventually to re-think his approach to Fiji politics, from one based on an open competition for Fijian votes (which led to charges of Indo-Fijian leaders trying to divide the Fijians for their own political gain and of the Alliance employing similar tactics among the Indo-Fijians) to a more structured consociational style of politics with political parties sharing power through multi-ethnic coalitions and governments, drawing their strength from the unity of the respective ethnic communities.

THE BUTADROKA EFFECT

The elections had only temporarily eclipsed the deepening schisms in the NFP, which came to the surface as soon as they were over. Koya's fortunes as political leader continued to plummet. What had once been seen as Koya's great strength was now perceived as his great weakness. In 1969 and 1970, Koya had used up a great deal of his own political capital in developing an amicable working relationship with Mara, eager, as we have seen, to avoid taking any steps which might derail Fiji's smooth transition to independence. Koya trusted Mara, he told officials of the Colonial Office, as the one Fijian leader with whom he could work. The two had traveled the world together to assure sceptics that the country had gone into independence through bi-partisan support. Mara told the Decolonization Committee of the United Nations, with Koya by his side, that the NFP leader had 'played

a notable and constructive part in our moves towards independence,' that their 'objectives were identical in their own separate ways.'⁶ There were regular breakfast sessions at the Travelodge in Suva between 'Sid' and 'Kamisesse.' The hotel guests were told how the two men together ran the country.

Within a short time, however, the euphoria of the early feel-good cooperation between the two leaders vanished. Mara was now safely ensconced in power, and keen to exercise it, to stamp his authority on the national scene. The early 1970s were golden years for the Alliance leader. He enjoyed enormous popularity at home and unqualified respect abroad for his advocacy of multiracialism and his stated commitment to democratic values and principles. Under his leadership, Fiji was firmly on its way to peace and prosperity. Overseas honours came in droves in the form of honorary degrees and invitations to address international gatherings. The world saw him as the undisputed leader not only of Fiji but of the broader South Pacific region as well, the founding father of regional cooperation, the advocate of the 'Pacific Way,' the title of his memoirs. With the world eating out of his hands, Mara now had less political need of Koya than he had in the late colonial period and in the early years of independence. The NFP leader had served his purpose, and Mara was moving on to greater and greener pastures on his own. 'Mara first used him [Koya] to drive a wedge within the party and then cut him adrift so he had nowhere to go,' wrote Karam Ramrakha.⁷ It was not for no reason that Apisai Tora often called Mara Machiavellian.

Ratu Mara had his own political constituency to placate, especially those who thought him too conciliatory and accommodating towards the non-Fijians, more mindful of their interests and concerns at the expense of those of his own people. Relations between the two men cooled to the point of no contact in the mid-1970s. Mara claimed in June 1977 that from January 1974 to 21 January 1977, Koya had not replied to any one of his letters to him, not even acknowledging receiving them as a matter of courtesy.⁸ This, if true, is an incredible dereliction of duty because the Constitution

provided for a consultative role for the Leader of the Opposition in making high level appointments in the judiciary and the public service.⁹ Relations deteriorated to such an extent that the Alliance leader threatened to resign after the September 1977 elections if Koya were returned as Leader of the Opposition. He would ask someone else in his party to take over because he could not simply work with the man. 'I have had enough of the four years I have had with him,' he said.¹⁰ Whether the Alliance leader was serious in his threats or not, it is difficult to tell: but one thing we do know is that Mara was in the habit of making such dramatic threats periodically to rally everyone behind him, playing upon his sense of indispensability to the nation. In this instance, he was probably hoping that his public utterances against Koya might assist his rivals (which they did). But of the soured relations between the two men there was no doubt.

Personality and circumstance played a role in the developing impasse between the two men, but the problem went beyond personalities. It is a truism that in ethnically polarized politics, moderation tends to be the loser, or comes second best. Concession and compromise are always viewed suspiciously as signs of failure and defeat, and the effort to widen the multiracial base of parties as a tactic to divide and conquer. This was not an aberration in Fiji; it was, in fact, a direct result of the kind of political culture that the 1970 Constitution encouraged. And yet, neither Koya nor Mara saw the connection between the two. Jai Ram Reddy would face a similar dilemma in the late 1990s. His effort to work cooperatively with Sitiveni Rabuka to review the flawed 1990 Constitution, his forming a coalition with him to contest the 1999 election and offering the Prime Ministership to the leader of the SVT party, should the Coalition win the elections, were all advertised by his opponents as the signs of a weak leader willing to 'sell' the interests of his own people for his short term gain, though what these short term gains were, no one elaborated. History has a curious way of repeating in Fiji.

The first threat to the politics of moderation came from Sakeasi Bakewa Butadroka, the founder of the Fijian Nationalist Party in 1974. From the province of Rewa (where he had once been the chair of the Provincial

Council), he represented the neglected and generally poor Serua-Namosi hinterland in Southwest Viti Levu. Butadroka was an Assistant Minister for Cooperatives in the first post-independence Alliance government.¹¹ Independent-minded and theatrical, not enamoured of the hierarchical social structures and cultural protocols of eastern, more Polynesian parts of Fiji, Butadroka aired his nationalist views privately within his party on many occasions over many years, but was ignored because what he was proposing was deemed to be ‘impracticable.’ Getting nowhere with his plans, he erupted on the national scene with a new party and a new emotive slogan: ‘Fiji for Fijians.’ His new trademark red bow tie, he said, symbolized the spilling of (Indian) blood if Fijians were not in political control. On 9 October 1975, on the eve of Fiji’s fifth year of independence, Butadroka moved a motion in the House of Representatives that ‘This House agrees that the time has arrived when Indians or people of Indian origin in this country be repatriated back to India and that their travelling expenses back home and compensation for their properties in this country be met by the British Government.’¹² The motion, seconded on a pro forma basis by the Alliance’s Kishor Govind to get a debate going, unleashed a torrent of unprecedented emotion across the floor of the House.

History, human rights, constitutional protection, the sufferings of the past, the importance of tolerance in multi-ethnic societies, all found their place in the wide ranging debate that grabbed the national attention as few other issues did. Butadroka’s point was simple. The Indo-Fijians were the bottleneck to Fijian progress, the noose around their neck. The Indo-Fijian community continued to progress while the Fijian ‘commits suicide in his own country.’ The Fijian people were not consulted about their introduction, and at independence, Fiji should have been returned to the Fijian people and their leaders. The indigenous Fijian ‘race’ should always be in political control of the country, not *vulagis*, foreigners, who had prospered through the generosity of the *tauveki*, the indigenous people. The leaders of the Fijian people had hoodwinked them for far too long. Ratu Mara came in for a particularly vicious attack. He was accused of ‘thinking only of his

name and honour,' when he 'sold the Fijian interests at the wholesale rate.' Butadroka was nothing if not a powerful, charismatic speaker, by turns theatrical and threatening, serious and disarming, one of the truly instinctive politicians on the Fijian side of politics. Apisai Tora was another.¹³

Ratu Mara condemned the motion in 'the strongest terms possible,' although he was acutely aware of the effect Butadroka's rhetoric had on the average Fijian in the villages. He introduced an amendment to the motion: 'To reaffirm the credit due to the Indians as well as to Europeans, Chinese and Pacific Islanders for the role they have played, are playing and *will assuredly continue to play* in the development of Fiji, and in particular their concern and willingness to support Government's policy in helping the Fijian people to improve their economic situation as quickly as possible.' Hoping for a bi-partisan opposition to the motion, he sent a draft to the NFP before the debate, but received no reply: not surprising in view of the ruptured relations between him and Koya. Questions were asked. Why did Mara mention other communities when the specific target of the original motion was the Indo-Fijian community? Because, he said in his defense, this was the first 'eviction' motion to come before parliament, and he wanted the other communities to know that their interests were also safeguarded by his government. And the second part of the amendment was designed simply to tell the Fijians that other communities were, indeed, trying to help them in different ways, directly and indirectly.

But politically all this was not enough for Koya and many in his party who thought Mara as usual was playing politics again, trying to have it both ways, an allegation angrily denied by the Alliance leader. Koya moved an amendment to Mara's amendment: 'That this House reaffirms that Indians along with all other races who are settled permanently in Fiji and their descendants are full and first class citizens, that Fiji is their homeland, that they are here to stay permanently and having regard to the Constitution of Fiji, this House calls upon every citizen and every organization in Fiji regardless of its ethnic, religious or political background to denounce publicly any person or organization which interferes with or disrupts the

multiracial harmony of Fiji.' Siddiq Koya was in full cry. Butadroka was 'pathologically sick' he said vehemently, and his motion should not have been entertained in the parliamentary chambers in the first place, because it was against the spirit of the Constitution and breached the Public Order Act by prejudicing public peace, inciting hatred and inflaming racial dislike. Mara's amendment did not 'go far enough,' for a people 'looking for an assurance that Fiji is their home.' Koya said in his trademark style: 'We are not here under license; we are here as of right. Full stop!' Ratu Mara's outright refusal to endorse Koya's proposed amendment, or some modified version of it, was too much for the Opposition leader. It was the straw that broke the camel's back.

While Butadroka's motion was still being debated in parliament, Koya told a party rally at the old Suva Town Hall that the Alliance had in store plans to do legally what Butadroka was proposing to do illegally. He had proof of this secret plan, he thundered, which he would reveal to an independent commission of enquiry. 'My cup of disillusionment has come to the brink,' Koya said, and promised that the NFP would 'completely re-examine its relations with the Alliance and prepare to struggle to maintain the constitutional rights of Indians, Europeans, Chinese and other communities in Fiji.'¹⁴ Mara was incensed at the allegations directed at him. If Koya could provide even a shred of evidence to back his claim, he would resign as Prime Minister and from parliament altogether. Koya did not respond. Perhaps he simply could not. There was no 'evidence.' The 'concept of multiracialism,' Koya said ruefully as he pondered the events of the past few weeks, 'has now become just words on paper, or perhaps words written on paper. Just words on paper, words spoken in the air.'¹⁵ In this assessment, he was not wrong. Race relations were indeed the poorest they had been for a long time.

Butadroka's unsettling 'Deport the Indians' message made the headlines in Fiji and across the world. It came just a year after Idi Amin had summarily expelled long-term Indian settlers from Uganda. If it could happen in Uganda, many pondered privately, why could it not

happen in Fiji? The Indo-Fijian community was squarely in Butadroka's gun sight, but there was another: the dominance of the eastern chiefs in the Fijian scheme of things. They owned nothing, he told his rallies, and yet they made all the decisions about the present and future of the Fijian people. He had the issue of land leases in mind, as we shall see. In some ways, Butadroka was making the same case as Tora had been doing in Western Viti Levu for more than a decade: the 'pernicious' presence of the eastern chiefs at the pinnacle of Fijian power, which was galling especially as western Viti Levu carried the nation's economy on its shoulders: pine, gold, sugar and latterly tourism. The anti-Mara and anti-Lauan sentiment formed an important cornerstone of Butadroka's political views. His personal dislike of the Alliance leader was complete. And his distrust of the Indo-Fijian community was not as narrowly bigoted as some believed. Ratu David Toganivalu, himself a man of wide multiracial friendships and sensible views, said that while many Fijians might not share the wording of the motion, deep down many shared the 'hidden sentiments that it expresses.' 'This is how we feel at times; at certain moments in times of anger this is what we say.' He was honest enough in his admission, but his words simply deepened the Indo-Fijians' sense of anxiety: to be told that this is how they were viewed by the Fijians, as foreigners and interlopers, after a century of living in the islands.

AGRICULTURAL LANDLORD AND TENANT ACT (ALTA)

No sooner was this motion debated in parliament than another perennially tricky issue raised its head: land. The land leases given under the ALTA were coming up for renewal. The original formula of 10+10+10 had left everyone dissatisfied. The tenants complained that the leases were too short, causing great uncertainty in their minds and impeding long term planning and investment in agriculture. The landowners complained that the hardship clause in the legislation, which required them to prove that they would suffer greater hardship than the tenants if the leases were renewed before an independent tribunal, had left them at the mercy of outsiders.

In practice, they found, hardship was extremely difficult to prove. In 1976, after nearly a decade of intermittent and interrupted work, the government introduced the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Bill in parliament. The Bill proposed that the three ten year terms be replaced by a straight thirty year lease, that is, initial 20+10. It recommended further that rent be assessed at six percent of the Unimproved Capital Value (UCV) of the land by a Committee of Valuers, comprising four persons, a chairperson and three valuers representing different sectors of the profession. Their principal task would be to determine and declare the unimproved capital value of different classes of agricultural land (A, B, C) rather than the individual values of each holding (which was impossible anyway). The UCV would be determined every five years at six percent per annum. The hardship clause was removed; now, if tenancy was not extended, it would only be on grounds of bad husbandry, giving the landlord the right to re-let. And the prohibition on the payment of premium by tenants and its acceptance by landlords was also removed. Premium equivalent to one year's rent was to be paid twice during the twenty year extension: in full, in advance and on the first day of extension.

NFP's Karam Ramrakha led the charge against the proposed legislation. A drafting error had inadvertently offered, or appeared to offer, fifty year leases, which some in the NFP erroneously and opportunistically claimed the Alliance had deliberately reduced to thirty years. Privately everyone conceded the drafting mistake. But their principal objection turned on the procedure of valuation, which Ramrakha said was the 'greatest killer.' The standard concept on which valuers worked was sales, 'but where land is a scarcity, where land mark up is artificially high, to take these sales was an oppression.' He suggested that rent should be based on what a 'willing tenant' could pay a 'willing landlord' provided they negotiated at arm's length and there was no compulsion or oppression on any side. Ramrakha asked for the bill to be deferred by six months for more reflection and analysis. Failing that, he would be happy if the rent fixing mechanism was given a twenty four month trial period to assess its suitability and fairness. The

Alliance would not budge. ALTA was the best they could offer, nothing more, if they were to carry the Fijians with them.

Koya objected to several provisions of the Bill. To start with, it would not provide a 'permanent, durable solution.' What would happen when the present leases expired because the amendments did not set up any machinery for further leases for tenants who would then be left at the mercy of the landlords? He stressed that the valuation of a fair market rent would be difficult as there was 'no free market in land.' The value of land would be in relation to the market forces. If the value of freehold land went up, so would the value of agricultural land. He suggested that productivity and yield be used as rent-fixing criterion. He opposed the concept of share-farming. He said that the Crown land should be treated as a separate category altogether. No Crown tenants should be ejected, and Crown leases should be given in perpetuity. He suggested the setting up of a national land commission which would recommend land policies and review land leases from time to time. The land commission idea would be revived by Mahendra Chaudhry two decades later, but the Alliance could not reasonably be expected to accede to the demand. Land, after all, was power, Fijian power, and any attempt to dilute it, or take it away from the domain of Fijian institutions, such as the Native Land Trust Board, could not be countenanced for purely political reasons, if nothing else. Koya also thought that since ALTO was an expiring piece of legislation, and since the economy would suffer massively if the leasing arrangement was not regularized, he could strike a better bargain by insisting on longer leases.¹⁶

Between the initial meeting of the NFP Working Committee which had advised its parliamentary group to abstain from voting and the eve of the vote, several parliamentarians had a re-think. Eight of them wrote to Koya on 14 October (1975) to reconvene a meeting of the parliamentary board to reconsider the issue. 'We have discussed the matter at length and some of us now feel that not supporting the Bill will be detrimental to the interests of the tenants.'¹⁷ Koya refused outright, saying that nothing had changed materially for another meeting to take place. The original deci-

sion to oppose the Bill would remain. But things had indeed changed. For one, the Alliance made it very plain that this was the best they could offer, and still carry the Great Council of Chiefs, the Fijian Affairs Board and the Native Land Trust Board with them. 'I can only commend the generosity of attitude this shows,' said Ratu Mara. 'It will certainly not be the Government's fault if this effort to improve the legislation is not allowed to take effect.'¹⁸ Fijian landlords around the country let it be known that any longer term leases were simply out of the question.

Attorney General John Falvey convinced Ramrakha and others that their fears about the legislation being abused by the landlords against the tenants were ill-founded. And the Fiji Law Society and some of the country's top Indo-Fijian lawyers, Ram Krishna, Bhupendra Patel, PD Patel, Rishi Shankar, GP Shankar, Manikam Pillay, and RD Patel offered similar advice.¹⁹ A specially commissioned opinion from Australian lawyer, Ken Handley QC, confirmed it. At the end of it all, though, was the simple, brutal fact: with the Fijian establishment not willing to budge an inch on the issue, and drawing a firm line in the sand, there was no way a permanent solution could be found for the lease problem. Thirty years was no solution, everyone agreed, but it was better than what the existing legislation provided. Again, everyone expressed the hope that in thirty years, the atmosphere might be more conducive to further dialogue, especially if more Fijians entered commercial agriculture, thereby removing race from the equation. Koya, for his part, wanted the problem resolved once and for all, though how in the face of the Fijian opposition he could achieve this unilaterally remained unclear. His critics accused him of gimmickry, of playing to the gallery of a perennially vulnerable Indo-Fijian agricultural community for purely political purposes.

In the end, eight NFP parliamentarians crossed the floor and voted for the Bill. Among those who supported the Bill was Jai Ram Reddy, then in the Senate (but who resigned his seat there upon voting for the Bill against his leader's advice). Other prominent people outside parliament who supported the Bill included the influential Swami Rudrananda and

MV Pillay, the future Alliance Attorney General, who argued that it was a positive Bill, even if a small step, in the right direction. 'If we reject the Bill,' argued Ramrakha, 'then we will be back again in the same old place and some farmers would lose their land after their leases expire. We feel that there are some good things in the Bill and hence we are asking people to accept in it in their best interest.'²⁰ 'There was no perfect solution to the land problem,' Jai Ram Reddy argued, 'but there could be no solution at all if the issue was dodged.' He said that a neutral and independent committee of valuers would minimize direct confrontation between tenants and landlords.²¹ Once the UCV was established, it would be gazetted and everyone would know about it. This would avoid individual landlords and tenants getting their own individual valuers to assess individual holdings. If tenants disagreed with the valuation or rental assessment, they could challenge it before the Central Agricultural Tribunal and, if still unsatisfied, could ask the Tribunal itself for an independent assessment. Rental on agricultural leases would be based not on the income derived from the land but on its capital values which, Reddy said, 'is fair.' It was also fair that tenants would receive compensation upon non-renewal or non-extension of leases.

Speaking to farmers in Uciwai, Lomolomo and Malomalo, Reddy said that the land issue was being unduly politicized. Some politicians 'keep the land issue alive for the coming general election. There is nothing live to harp on during election time next year and that's why some of them are trying to pour kerosene on the fire to keep it on.' People should not be 'fooled by thunderous speeches.'²² Perhaps he had Koya in mind. ALTA was a sensible, pragmatic solution to a perennially intractable problem. 'I am convinced in my heart that the solutions of the type we are seeking do not come for the asking,' Reddy said.²³ Nonetheless, Reddy would be blamed again and again for 'selling out' Indian interests on land. An NFP parliamentarian from Ba and a strong Koya man, called the day the Bill was passed 'a dire black day on which the common people had been sold out.'²⁴ He was not alone in echoing that sentiment. If only Reddy and others



NFP implodes: Koya and Ramrakha confront each other over ALTA at the Suva Town Hall, 1976. Photo courtesy of Fiji Sun.

had supported his leader, the critics of the Bill said, the Indo-Fijian community would not have the land problem to face.

Reddy was unrepentant. As late as March 1998, he praised ALTA as a progressive piece of legislation.²⁵ It improved the situation of the tenants and brought greater stability, he said. 'But let us not overlook one thing. The landowners to their credit did not reclaim one inch of their land in 1976. Every single agricultural lease was extended.' He said in February 1999 that no solution would be viable unless it was 'accepted by those who own the land and those who want to use it.' He continued, 'I have brothers, uncles, aunts, relations and friends, all of whom are sitting on leasehold land. Just as I seek to understand the feelings of insecurity, often despondency of these people, I also think about what the landowners must think, how they must feel and what their aspirations might be. For practical and just solution of this problem, I think it is essential that we step into each other's shoes, be it momentarily, to see how others see the problem, because that understanding is essential in our search for just solutions.'²⁶ Reddy was ridiculed by his opponents for adopting this stance. The Fiji Labour Party would trash ALTA in the 1990s as a document of abject surrender, with Reddy as its principal architect, which, of course, he was not, because he was not an

elected member of parliament when the Bill was passed. When the Qarase government sought to replace ALTA with another piece of legislation, the Native Land Trust Act (NLTA), which gave the landowners more say, Labour immediately did an about turn and defended ALTA as the best solution available. The unassailable truth articulated by Reddy remains.

DEEPENING DIVISIONS

The ALTA debate brought the internal divisions in the NFP out in the open, much to the growing dismay of its supporters and to the gleeful delight of its opponents. A Suva Town Hall meeting, after the Bill had been passed (on 10 November 1976) nearly erupted in a fist fight, with Koya and Ramrakha wagging fingers at each other on the stage in full view of the media and in front of some five hundred at the meeting (at which I was present). Koya called those who had supported the passage of ALTA 'bajaaru,' street prostitutes.²⁷ People thought he had Irene Jai Narayan in mind when he uttered those offensive words. He might have, but it was also political speech-making of the old style, rough and hard, no-holds barred, but now the media was watching closely, and national elections were just around the corner. The abusive language was jarring when the NFP leader probably knew in his heart that a permanent solution to the land problem could never be had against the determined opposition of the Fijian landowners. But political points had to be secured. 'I think his days are numbered,' said Ramrakha, quite prophetically, as it turned out.²⁸ Ugly epithets flew freely about 'gundatism' and 'gangsterism.' Retaliating, Koya wanted the six Indian NFP parliamentarians who had voted for the Bill removed from the Opposition benches in parliament,²⁹ but not, interestingly enough, the two Fijian members who had also voted for it: Isikeli Nadalo and Atunaisa Maitoga.³⁰ And he had the locks to the Opposition office changed to keep the backers of ALTA out. He also tried unsuccessfully (for the time being) to have Irene Jai Narayan replaced as the Opposition nominee on a Parliamentary Select Committee and Karam Ramrakha as the Opposition Whip.

More trouble was in the offing when RD Patel resigned as Speaker of the House of Representatives and from the NFP because ‘cancers of cliquism and opportunism’ were eating away the heart of the party. Dissatisfaction with Koya’s leadership style was one issue, but what finally triggered Patel’s resignation was his leader’s refusal to support a proposal for a \$2.50 per ton deduction to establish a sugar price support fund. The fund had a long history. It was started by the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Food shortly after World War II to cover war damages to the infrastructure of the sugar industry in the colonies, and to give the colonial producers some stability and funds for development purposes. Compulsory grower contribution to the fund was terminated following the recommendations of the Eve Commission in 1961, and the contributions reimbursed to the holders of contracts. This created some confusion as those who had sold their land contracts or had moved to other areas and acquired new contracts did not receive any reimbursement. Close to about \$97,000 remained in the fund after contract holders had withdrawn amounts equivalent to their contribution and credit. The Denning Arbitration in 1969 recommended a minimum guaranteed price per ton of cane. This fund could be used to augment the price in the lean years when the price of cane was less than the guaranteed minimum; and cane price following Lome were high. The deduction would guarantee a minimum price and, as a bonus, would be tax free. It would be free from other deductions as well as from attachment from the farmers’ creditors. The farmers would be able to will their contribution, and in times of crisis, borrow against the sum they had contributed.³¹ To prevent a confusing situation from the past recurring, the fund would be in the name of the individual contract holder and not the contract itself, which could be sold to someone else. The proposal was supported by Swami Rudrananda, who had unparalleled knowledge of the sugar farming community and of the sugar industry generally.

At first, Koya was inclined to support the proposal after he and Mara had returned from a joint trip to Europe, but then changed his mind, which contributed to the complete breakdown of relations between the two lead-

ers.³² Koya recalled how in the past farmers who had lost their land to the Fijians had also seen their funds being paid out to them. He refused to accept the proposals for the various safeguards mentioned above. He also feared that the funds would provide the government with a nest egg at the expense of the growers. Koya was falling out with Mara and saw no good reason to lend him a helping hand politically. In hindsight, the stabilization scheme seems eminently sensible, a kind of compulsory national provident fund for cane growers, but it was not to be. It was another of those missed opportunities that stalk the corridors of Indo-Fijian history. Koya did not realize it at the time, or perhaps he never did, that having Swamiji as an opponent was a fatal mistake. He was an immensely powerful figure in the cane growing community whose advice carried great weight. He was, with AD Patel, a leading figure in the 1943 strike and on sugar matters was always with Patel throughout the 1950s and 1960s. People were incensed when they heard a rumour that some fanatical Koya supporter had tugged at Swamiji's saffron attire. For Hindus, insulting people of the cloth is an unspeakable crime.

Koya's fate was sealed the moment he alienated the Swami. One by one, people who were once with him began to leave. In Lautoka, an ardent Koya supporter and an influential figure locally, Sardar Veerasami Mudaliar, criticized Koya's leadership,³³ as did Pratap Singh, former Ba branch president. In Nausori, Councillor Krishnanand Chaudhry expressed no confidence in Koya. Many prominent party members resigned, including CH Patel, Madho Tikaram and Asha Bhai Patel. Ratu Julian Toganivalu switched his support to RD Patel and became a bitter critic of Koya's style of leadership, as did Wilfrid Sugrim, a former mayor of Lautoka, Maulvi Mohammed Hussain of Rifle Range and another prominent resident, Waliiji.³⁴ Koya was widely criticized for defending in court the sacked Alliance Commerce Minister MT Khan on corruption charges instead of being present in parliament when important bills, including ALTA, were being debated. Many were disillusioned with Koya's silence over the maverick Vijay Parmanandam re-joining the party, without explanation or

apology, after a stint on the Alliance benches and after savagely criticizing his former party members. He was and always remained a Koya man. And Ratu Mosese Varasikete Tuisawau resigned from the NFP to join the Fijian nationalists. Religion entered politics — not in September 1977 elections, as is widely thought, but in March of that year. At a meeting in Raviravi, Ba, a speaker told Jai Ram Reddy to his face that Muslims numbering around three thousand in the district and surrounding areas would not support him.³⁵ We don't know the reason for this provocative declaration, though it was probably connected to Reddy's support for ALTA and his support for Swamiji, to whom he was close. Reddy's supporters were angered by the remarks, saying the incident 'would not have happened if Mr Koya had taken steps [to control his followers].'³⁶

Koya was in strife while his arch rivals were enjoying the limelight. In January 1977, the *Fiji Times* voted Ratu Mara 'Statesman of the Year,' calling him 'far-sighted, thoughtful, brooding, sometimes moody, occasionally querulous, icy and witty — these are just a few aspects of the Mara character. They add up to an extraordinary personality.' Mrs Irene Jai Narayan was declared the 'Woman of the Year': 'Imperious yet gracious, icy yet affectionate, somber yet humorous, earthy yet intellectual. Mrs Narayan exudes that rare quality of character which makes stars and politicians — charisma.' Koya was no stranger to adversity or negative comparisons, but it was important, bearing in mind the events which were soon to follow, that on the eve of the general elections, the NFP was deeply divided and the character and quality of Koya's leadership had become a corrosive issue for the party. It had been an issue for a long time. Some influential party leaders had never wanted Koya to succeed AD Patel, preferring, if no suitable compromise candidate was available, to have the NFP run by a committee. 'How far can power-madness go,' asked RD Patel, who was to oppose Koya in the forthcoming elections. 'If he could do this to his own colleagues only as Leader of the Opposition [changed the locks to the Opposition office to keep some of his own colleagues out] what would he do if he were to become Prime Minister?'³⁷ Patel's characterization of Koya might under-

standably be dismissed as the jaundiced ruminations of a political foe, down and out in the wilderness, but sadly for the NFP leader, many in the party were asking the same question. His time was running out.

TOWARDS APRIL 1977

As the NFP prepared for the April 1977 general elections, some in the party did not want Koya both as party president and party leader. They wanted the two posts separated. Hitherto, beginning with AD Patel, the two positions were held by the same person, giving him considerable power over both party as well as parliamentary matters. Koya would hear none of it and refused to budge, regarding himself, as one of its founders, to be the guardian of the party's best interests. As party president, he wielded considerable influence over the selection of candidates for elections, besides effectively controlling the party machinery. Irene Narayan, in particular, refused to accept Koya's leadership. She had understandably taken great offence at being called a 'bajaaru' by Koya. She moreover fancied herself a potential leader in her own right, and a better one too by her reckoning, committing herself fulltime to the position. Rival branches were being formed in the constituencies, with once loyal NFP supporters threatening to stand against each other. Once again, party elders turned to Reddy to stop the unfolding chaos. At an emergency meeting in Lautoka, Reddy proposed the separation of the positions of party president and party's parliamentary leader. His proposal was accepted with acclamation and relief by the party's supporters. Irene Jai Narayan became party president and Koya its parliamentary leader. A punctured tyre seemed to have been repaired, just in time, for elections were just around the corner, but no one in their hearts really believed that the worst was over for the party. Reddy's name 'should go down in the history books of Fiji,' Koya enthused, though he remarked privately when his once right hand man Veerasami Mudaliar nominated Mrs Narayan for president: 'This is the first time in my life I have been outplayed.'³⁸

By early 1977, it was clear to everyone that there were two factions in the NFP. One was led loosely by the Ramrakha-Narayan group, based in

Suva, and other led by Koya with its support base in the cane belt. Daggers were drawn, and there was no trust between them. The problem arose when it came to selecting candidates for the general election. A solution was found when the party elders, including Koya, personally pleaded with Reddy to chair the selection committee, and both sides accepted him as the best person for the job. The full committee comprised seven members each of the Koya and the Narayan-Ramrakha factions and two 'independents': Ramanbhai Patel of Lautoka and Balakrishna Sardar of Ba.³⁹ The decision of the Selection Committee would be final, Reddy said, adding that no amount of 'illegal meetings' and 'campaignings' would have on any impact on its work. 'The settlement must succeed,' he added, 'and no one should sabotage it.'⁴⁰ That, in the circumstances, was too much to hope for. To avoid accusations of self interest in the selection of candidates, the party leaders offered Reddy the safe Ba-Lautoka Rural Indian communal seat at the outset. Reddy was accused by some, such as 'Naulu' Puran Singh, of 'filling his own plate' before thinking of anyone else, and of harboring future leadership ambitions.⁴¹ 'I do not want to become party leader,' Reddy told those who suspected him of plotting his way to the top. But many minds were already made up either way. Those who missed out on selection held Reddy personally responsible for their political demise and rounded on him at their rallies. But Reddy's performance as the chairman of the selection committee was widely praised as 'nothing short of brilliant.' 'He lived up to every expectation,' recalls Karam Ramrakha.⁴² Koya was equally fulsome in praise. 'Today is a historic day for Fiji,' he said.⁴³

Still, at the end of it all, party unity was a sham for all to see that no amount of adroit internal patching up could hide. Party members were contesting against each other. RD Patel was standing as an independent against Koya, while in Navua, the district branch backed Vijay Parmanandam against the official NFP candidate. In Labasa, former NFP parliamentarian and Koya loyalist who had missed out on selection, Ram Jati Singh, openly declared his support for the 'independent' Vishnu Prasad against the official NFP candidate Sarwan Singh, a local Punjabi lawyer.⁴⁴ Koya

did not campaign in Vanua Levu at all. Publicly, he supported the official candidates, but privately encouraged the independents against them, leading Reddy to ask Koya to clarify his position. 'Most of the independents who are opposing the party are supporters of Mr Koya,' he said.⁴⁵ The *Fiji Sun* added: 'The fact that Mr Koya made this denunciation [of rebels and independents] in person only on Saturday after direct questioning from Mr Reddy destroys any effect the denunciation might have.'⁴⁶

It was a bitter campaign. In truth, the NFP was not fighting the Alliance at all; it was fighting itself. Political campaigns in the Indo-Fijian community are never for the faint-hearted. Even so, by the usual standards, this was a rough affair. There were violent clashes between rival supporters, stoning houses and smashing car windows, making menacing midnight phone calls. Fist fights broke out at rallies among supporters of rival candidates. Passions were aroused as never before because there is always an edge, an intensity to intra-family battles. RD Patel's own house was stoned several times, his car screen smashed. One of Patel's supporters was so traumatized when his house was stoned at midnight after he had spoken at a rally, that he immediately left the area for good, fearing for his life. Reddy still recalls the incident vividly. He was deeply disturbed by it. People could easily have been killed, he says. It was politics old style, rough and raw, tit-for-tat, 'physical persuasion' applied freely and fiercely across the board. Most candidates deliberately kept themselves well below the national radar, focusing on winning in their own constituencies, and uncertain about where the party leaders stood on issues.

Strangely enough, party secretary Karam Ramrakha admitted division in the middle of the campaign. 'One cannot really say that we are functioning as a happy united party at the moment.' For him, Koya's leadership was an issue and he promised to bring him down.⁴⁷ 'The real question,' he said, 'is whether you run the NFP as a joint family system where everyone stays where they are, or whether you chase them about.' That, he said, was the 'real reason' behind the rift between the two factions.⁴⁸ What sparked the rift, he continued, was the re-admission of Vijay Parmanandam into the

NFP after he had defected to the Alliance. 'No right thinking party can allow a bloke to come in and go out like that just as if he was in his own little night club.' Who would lead the party if it won the election, he was asked. The leadership question is 'wide open now,' he said, to be decided by the new parliamentary group. That was procedurally correct, although convention dictated that the person who leads the party to victory would normally be expected to lead it in parliament. Ramrakha's words were correctly read to mean no confidence in Koya.

Internal divisions over leadership and personalities apart, there were a few issues that ignited some passion in the campaign. Land and ALTA featured prominently, with attendant accusations about who had sold out to whom over what and for how much. So also did the government's admission and scholarship policies at the University of the South Pacific. In 1977, the government decided that Fijian students with 216 marks in their University Entrance exam would be eligible for government scholarship while Indo-Fijian students would need 261 marks for financial assistance. The issue caught on because for Indo-Fijians, education was the main avenue for economic improvement and upward mobility, and the gap seemed patently discriminatory. Mara likened the scholarship award to applying fertilizer to less fertile areas to make them productive, that is, to enable Fijian students to enter university on lesser marks and on less stringent terms in the hope that they might succeed later. He also reminded the NFP of the recommendations of the 1969 Education Commission that fifty per cent of all government scholarships should be awarded to indigenous Fijians and the unused amount should be allocated on a 'parallel block' basis for other specifically Fijian projects.⁴⁹ There had been no disagreement with the recommendations then.

That was true, but now was election time, and the issue promised good dividends for the party. The policy of discrimination, Koya said 'is bound to produce recriminations, frustrations, bitterness, the destruction of the image and the reputation of the university and indeed the Government of the day in the eyes of the world.'⁵⁰ Koya accused the government of not

solving the land problem and of not fostering a sense of nationalism in the country. Butadroka's motion became an emotional issue, with Koya accusing the Alliance of failing to 'give an effective and appropriate assurance to the Indian community.' The absence of Indo-Fijians in the army was raised along their paltry presence in the higher echelons of the civil service. 'Anybody can be accepted into the army,' Colonel Paul Manueli, then head of the Fiji Military Forces, said, 'but we do not provide special meals.'⁵¹ It seemed a lame excuse, nothing more. Why not, it was asked, when exceptions were made for Fijians in other areas of public service? What about the Gurkhas, it was asked, who did not eat beef? The message, distilled to its bare essence, was simple: that the Fijian-dominated Alliance party would never relinquish control of the military, or dilute the Fijian presence in it, which it saw as the ultimate bastion of power for the Fijian establishment.

In the Fijian camp, especially in southeastern Viti Levu, Sakeasi Butadroka was making steady inroads into what had once been an impregnable Alliance stronghold. His 'Deport the Indians' platform appealed to many ordinary Fijians untouched by modernity, who were neglected and marginalized in the generally depressing subsistence sector while the Indo-Fijians appeared to be marching purposefully ahead, and seen as the cause of their misery. They responded similarly to the accusation that the Alliance had neglected them, taken them for granted, while pouring development aid into Mara's own maritime province of Lau. Butadroka was articulating a silent, sporadic Fijian grievance against the dominance of eastern islander Fijians on the national scene, a grievance that went back to the days of Apolosi Nawai during the early days of the 20th century. The Fijian Nationalist Party promised that the interests of the Fijian people would be paramount at all times, that the Fijians should always hold the positions of Governor General, Prime Minister, Minister for Fijian Affairs, Agriculture, Rural Development, Land, Home Affairs, Commerce, Industry and Cooperatives, strengthening of the Fijian Administration, establishing a Fijian Institute to educate Fijians in business and, of course, repatriating Indians back to India. Butadroka, in Ahmed Ali's view, was



Jai Ram Reddy victorious in the April election. Photo courtesy of Fiji Sun.

capitalizing ‘on prejudices and phobias that many disadvantaged groups in plural societies tend to have.’⁵² That was true except that there were many disadvantaged groups among Indo-Fijians as well.

THE BOMBSHELL

On Monday 5 April, the final results were officially known, though by the previous evening the trend was clear. Jai Ram Reddy won his seat comfortably with 7481 votes to Alliance’s Uday Singh’s 2341, but the victory, he said, was ‘an anticlimax of a sort’ because the bitter infighting in the party that had hobbled its prospects and disenchanted its supporters. There was therefore nothing to celebrate. He was already looking ahead, beyond the party. ‘I am going to work for the country,’ he said. Koya defeated Patel by 5312 votes to 3474. This was the lowest majority of votes in an Indian communal seat, which led Patel to claim that Koya had ‘no moral right now to aspire as the leader of the parliamentary party.’⁵³ Whether Koya had the moral right or not was moot, but what was beyond doubt was that he had lost his firm grip on the new parliamentary team. Many new members

were not beholden to him personally as they had been in the past, and their experience and outlook are different as well.

The greatest bombshell of the April general election was the victory of Sakeasi Butadroka and his Fijian Nationalist Party, which polled an astounding 24 per cent of the Fijian communal votes, causing the defeat of the Alliance. The NFP won 26 seats, the Alliance 24, Nationalists one and one independent (Ratu Osea Gavidu). NFP and indeed the country were caught entirely by surprise at their electoral triumph over the Alliance. They were caught 'with their pants down,' as Jai Ram Reddy put it in 1993.⁵⁴ We now know why. Like any political party competing for power, the NFP should have been prepared for the eventuality of victory. But it was not. There was an air of apprehension, an eerie calm, surrounding the election results. There were no celebrations anywhere, none of the hooting of horns that usually accompanied election victories. The unspoken question on everyone's mind was whether an 'Indian-led' government would be acceptable to the Fijians whose emotions had been aroused by Butadroka's fiery nationalist rhetoric. The once unthinkable question had been asked: should Indian people be allowed to belong to Fiji as full citizens. And the answer to it had not satisfied everyone.

No one was probably more shocked with the victory than Siddiq Koya himself. He acted swiftly though. Without the approval of his new parliamentary caucus, which had yet to convene, Koya went to SB Patel on Monday night (5 April) and asked him to telephone Ratu Mara on his behalf to explore the possibility of a coalition government led by Ratu Mara himself, with Ratu Penaia as his deputy. Koya would accept a Mara-led coalition government 'even if it meant him being excluded from Cabinet.'⁵⁵ His chief concern, he reportedly said, was to address the anxiety of the Fijian people. SB Patel had long been an advisor and confidante to Indian leaders behind the scenes, a man of wide connections and trusted and respected by everyone as a fair intermediary (but who had been ignored by Koya for some years).⁵⁶ The approach to Patel was the first overt sign of Koya's lack of confidence in a government led by him. It was a realistic assessment. The

country was not ready for an 'Indian' prime minister yet. Patel rang Mara on Tuesday at 7:30 in the morning. Mara, still smarting at his defeat, flatly declined the coalition offer.

Around the same time, Koya asked Kuar Battan Singh to plead with Mara to continue as Chairman of ACP/EEC meeting scheduled to take place in Suva at the time.⁵⁷ Singh was a close personal friend of Ratu Mara's, their friendship going back decades when Mara served as a district officer in the Nausori region. Mara agreed, but only in his capacity as a caretaker prime minister, not as a leader of a coalition government. And still looking for a way out of what seemed to be developing as a potentially fraught situation, Jai Ram Reddy was encouraged to issue a statement over the radio outlining reasons why a coalition government led by Ratu Mara was the best option at the time. The statement was intended to rally public opinion in favor of a coalition government, in essence, repeating the proposal SB Patel had privately put to Mara earlier, with Koya's full knowledge and support.

Reddy's statement became one of the most controversial 'events' of the time. For years later, it was recalled as an act of treachery by a man against his own leader, which had effectively undermined the NFP's prospects of forming the new government and put an ineradicable stain on the image and reputation of the Indo-Fijian community. What precisely, then, did Reddy say? 'I don't believe that a government by the NFP would be viable at this time.' The careful choice of words is important. He did not say that the NFP was 'unable to form a government' as his critics freely told the press; he had raised the issue of viability. It was a fine 'lawyerly' distinction, as Mara recalled later, that went above the heads of most people. Reddy had articulated what was, in fact, the consensus opinion at the time. The NFP did not have a workable majority in parliament, Reddy said, with only twenty six members to the Alliance's twenty four and one each for the Fijian Nationalists and Independents. There was more to forming a government than simply having ministers, Reddy argued. 'Several questions arise here. Firstly, would an NFP Government have the unquestionable loyalty of the civil service, the armed forces, the police, and so on? I am not

saying that it would not, but these are some of the considerations that one takes into account in deciding whether the Government would be viable or not.' Reddy was again expressing the widely shared fears of the Indo-Fijian community, not casting doubt on the loyalty of the services as the latter part of his statement clearly shows. The third point Reddy made concerned the question of acceptability. 'Would an NFP Government be acceptable to all the ethnic groups in Fiji? Anyone might say that the voters have given their verdict. There may be something there but several factors have worked in these elections and you have Butadroka's statement that he would like to see an NFP victory simply to show to the Fijians that Fiji does not belong to them. I do not know to what extent this factor has contributed to the gain that the National Federation Party made but certainly this is something that one must bear in mind.'

Reddy also raised questions about the complications that could arise in the Senate. 'If the NFP becomes the Government, you are going to have a situation where the Prime Minister would have seven nominees in the Senate and the combined strength of the Great Council of Chiefs' members and the Leader of the Opposition's members will be something like 14, and if they have made a mind to, they could frustrate legislation by delaying it and this is another practical consideration that one must take into account.' The final consideration, which caused the greatest controversy, concerned the question of leadership. Reddy asked the question: 'Does the National Federation Party have a person of the stature that he can truly claim to be the leader of the people of Fiji?' He answered: 'I do not believe we have one at the present time.' Further, 'a large majority' continued to look to Ratu Mara for leadership. That was a true assessment and everyone agreed with it, including Koya himself. All that Reddy did was to say in public what Koya was saying in private: that, in the circumstances, it was better for Ratu Mara to lead the country than for someone else.

When asked later, Reddy said that he had made the statement in the context of a broadly-based national government. 'It was not intended to reflect upon the ability of any member on the Opposition benches. It was

made with sincerity believing in the essential truth of the statement.' Reddy added that 'the results of the elections were unexpected from our point of view. We did not quite realize it would turn out this way and that many factors have contributed to it. Only three weeks ago — that was at the height of the crisis in the party — we were wondering whether we would retain the 19 seats we had in the old House.' Finally and most importantly, he said, 'the point that is to be borne in mind is that a coalition government, which I think is the ideal, would really be quite consistent with what the Alliance has advocated all along, namely sharing and caring.' It would be a government made up of all the ethnic groups of both parties. This truly representative government would be consistent 'between what the Alliance has advocated all along and what I am suggesting now. So I do believe that a coalition under the leadership of the Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, would, in the circumstances, be the ideal solution, but I must again add that these are my personal views.' The last is true only in the narrow sense. The statement had not been approved by the NFP's parliamentary board, but its contents were widely canvassed and approved, including by Koya himself. Reddy told a meeting in May 1977 that before he gave that statement, 'I told him about it and he approved. It is shocking that today he is still making an issue of it.' 'It's a damn lie now to say that no one knew about the statement I gave. It's the truth: get used to it.'⁵⁸ When Reddy asked Koya why he had not come to his defense when he was being bitterly attacked, Koya made light of the issue. 'I do not defend people who are innocent. I only defend those who are at fault. You must be innocent. You do not need a lawyer.'⁵⁹ We shall return to Reddy's statement later in the chapter.

In Suva, Ratu Mara had tended his resignation immediately after the election results were known. 'I am enjoying being Leader of the Opposition already,' he quipped. 'I have time to look after my own affairs, and time to be with my family.'⁶⁰ He cleared his office and moved to a rented accommodation in Lami on the outskirts of Suva. The symbolism of Mara, a high Fijian chief, living in rented accommodation was itself potent. Why did Mara decline the offer of coalition? To join a coalition would compro-

mise his political principles, he said. It would play straight into the hands of Sakeasi Butadroka because 'Fijians will be flocking to his side.' It would also mean 'betraying' people who had stood by him all along but who had been defeated by the Opposition. 'Let us be quite frank,' Mara said. 'I was not being invited to join in power sharing. I was being begged to bail out the Opposition from a position which they did not feel capable of sustaining.' He continued: 'Our party made it plain from the outset that it was not prepared to enter a coalition government. I said in my first election broadcast: I have never deviated. So if the Opposition thought that there was any possibility of a coalition then it can only mean they did not believe me. And I am sorry if that is so.'⁶¹

The time for coalition had passed, Mara said. Having won the election, it was now the NFP's responsibility to govern without further delay. Could the NFP with such a slim majority form an effective government, Mara was asked. 'I have already stated that if I have a majority of one, I can govern this country, and quite effectively.' However, Mara agreed to lead an Alliance caretaker government, and agreed further to meet the NFP at Government House on 7 April to sort out the arrangements. Mara's hasty resignation led Dr Lindsay Verrier, the eccentric medical doctor who was once the secretary of the Alliance Party, to say that a 'government of mature minds, when it resigns, does it with care, with dignity and with respect. It doesn't slam its desk drawers and rush for the lift.'⁶² But that is precisely what the Alliance Party did. What Mara wanted, and what the Governor General offered, was a 'lifeline to a government in office which is desperately keen to have another bite at the cherry.'⁶³ What is remarkable about those four or five confusing days is the absence of direct communication between the principal players on the scene. There was no direct line between Mara and Koya. They both talked through intermediaries, or through the media. One piece of news that made the rounds was that Mara had said that no formal proposal had come from the NFP for a coalition government, which is why he had not

considered the subject. Reacting to the news, or rumour, the entire NFP parliamentary group decided, on the evening of 5 April, to make a formal offer of coalition to the Alliance Party. The proposal, it was resolved, should be come from the President of the National Federation Party, Irene Jai Narayan, to the President of the Alliance Party, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

Koya himself drafted the letter (see next page) and had Mrs Narayan sign it as president of the party.⁶⁴ The letter was delivered to Mara's residence by Ramrakha at 8 pm. The NFP members awaited his response at the Opposition office. When none came by 11:30, they retired. Next morning, Wednesday at 7:30, Irene Jai Narayan rang Mara to seek his response to the proposal. Mara promised to get back to her by 11. At ten minutes past 11, he rang to say that he would not consider the proposal for a coalition for reasons he later articulated in the media. With the firm no now confirmed, NFP said that it was ready to form government.

The Governor General, Ratu Sir George Cakobau, summoned the NFP and an Alliance delegation to Government House to get their views on the formation of a new government. The Alliance did not attend, mistakenly thinking that the NFP was in the process of forming a government which would then make the meeting moot. This misunderstanding was again the result of no contact between the two parties. Ratu George, reading from a prepared text,⁶⁵ informed the NFP delegation, comprising Irene Jai Narayan, Atunaisa Maitoga, Karam Ramrakha and Jai Ram Reddy, of the Alliance's rejection of the Coalition proposal and asked the party to 'inform him forthwith whether it proposed to form a Ministry.'⁶⁶ The NFP delegation informed the Governor General that they would 'proceed without delay' to form the next Government of Fiji; 'elect a leader under its prescribed procedure' which provided that the elected Members of the House of Representatives of 'should elect a Party Leader from within its ranks;' 'request His Excellency to appoint the Party Leader as the Prime Minister of Fiji;' and ask him 'to swear in the Prime Minister and members of Cabinet today.' Ratu George 'took note of the view of the delegation,

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

NATIONAL FEDERATION PARTY

5th April, 1977.

The President,
Alliance Party,
SUVI.

Sir,

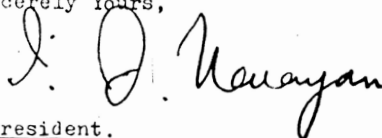
I have the honour to inform you that a formal meeting of the newly elected Members of Parliament took place this evening. At this meeting, it was decided that in the national interest an official offer should be made to your Party to form and accept coalition government in the circumstances now prevailing. This offer is being made following the informal discussions between our Mr. K.C. Ramrakha and your good self on the 4th instant.

The concept of a coalition would of course mean that Cabinet would consist of members from both sides. Once the concept can be accepted in principle we suggest further negotiations, and talks should take place.

A delegation consisting of Messrs S.M. Koya K.C. Ramrakha, Captain Atunaisa Maitoga and myself is prepared to call on you at this evening and discuss this matter with you and your side.

Our Parliamentary Party meeting has been adjourned till later in the evening, and we would be most obliged if this matter could be treated as urgent. Our telephone numbers are 211-580, or 211-444, and we would appreciate your reaching us at this number.

Sincerely Yours,



President.

*NFP's much maligned letter to Ratu Mara exploring a coalition government.
Courtesy of Fiji National Archives.*

and stated that his office would wait to hear from them during the day and would be in a position to attend to the swearing of the Prime Minister and Members of the Cabinet.⁶⁷

The delegation then returned to the NFP parliamentary office to elect a new party leader and, in effect, the next Prime Minister of Fiji. What transpired between about 11 am and 4 pm is still shrouded in considerable controversy about who supported, or did not, support whom. But the most important facts are known with reasonable certainty. Two names were put up for leadership, Siddiq Koya and Captain Atunaisa Maitoga, who had won the Vanua Levu Fijian National seat against Alliance's Ratu Josefa Iloilo. Maitoga was new in parliament, having entered it in 1972 after defeating Ratu Penaia Ganilau. He would soon disappear from the public view without a trace. Why his name was put forward and not someone else's with greater experience and authority, such as Ramrakha or Irene Jai Narayan, is best left to idle speculation. Putting up an unknown lightweight against the party leader, indeed one of its founders, was a cruel blunder, a fateful mistake, from which the NFP would take a long time to recover. Apisai Tora thought Koya's election would be a mere formality. He, and many others, were therefore shocked to discover that the first ballot had ended in a tie, 13-13. 'I thought Captain Maitoga would have three or four votes,' Tora recalled, 'but when there was a tie, I knew there was going to be trouble.' In the second round, one of Maitoga's supporters, Timoci Naco, reportedly defected to the Koya camp, thus handing him the victory 14-12.⁶⁸ Koya then asked Tora to make a swearing-in appointment at Government House for noon.

That had to be postponed till 1 pm because no consensus could be reached on the allocation of cabinet portfolios. Some members hesitated to serve in a Koya cabinet. Others refused if Tora was offered the position of Deputy Prime Minister. When Koya announced Subramani Baswaiya as his choice for Finance Minister, Boyan Crampton threatened to storm out of the meeting. Crampton had defeated Alliance's Dan Costello for the Northern General National seat and wanted the Finance portfolio as his

just reward. 'If you walk out, you stay out,' Koya told him sharply, upon which Crampton decided to stay. Still unable to agree, Koya asked the Fijian members of the party to have an emergency meeting in an adjacent room. 'We thought if the Indian members could not reach an agreement we will work out among ourselves seat allocation and tell Mr Koya to assist him,' Tora recalled.

The appointment with Government House postponed to 4 pm had to be delayed further. Meanwhile, the Fijian group presented Koya with their list for the different portfolios: Maitoga for Deputy Prime Minister, Ro Asela Logavatu for Lands and Mineral Resources, Timoci Naco for Agriculture, and Isikeli Nadalo for Fijian Affairs and Rural Development. Chandra Pillay agreed to serve as Minister for Urban Development, Housing and Social Welfare. Irene Jai Narayan was offered the Education portfolio which she said she would accept only if Koya gave her an unqualified assurance that he would not ceremoniously dump her as he had done in the past. Koya refused to give that undertaking, according to Mrs Narayan. Koya asked Reddy to become Speaker, saying 'Jai, it will be good to have someone like you in that position.' Reddy agreed; he remembers those words vividly. He urged others to rally behind Koya as well. He said to Ramrakha, who reluctantly agreed to accept the post of Attorney General, 'Karam, we have got to help him.'⁶⁹ Time was of essence. Reddy was concerned about the continuing delay and, recalled Harish Sharma, urged Koya to go to the Government House immediately. Other portfolios could be allocated later. Ratu Osea Gavidi, the independent parliamentarian from Nadroga, agreed to support the NFP, but would not be part of the government. Butadroka declared 'No Dice' to an invitation to support the NFP.⁷⁰ 'My party does not want an Indian government to run the country and I take it that the NFP is an Indian political party.' Even a million dollars would not buy his vote, he quipped.

THE D-DAY: APRIL 7⁷¹

- 9:15 National Federation Party parliamentarians assemble at the Opposition office, Government Buildings
- 9:45 NFP President Mrs Irene Jai Narayan, KC Ramrakha, Jai Ram Reddy and Captain Atunaisa Maitoga leave Opposition office for Government House
- 10:00 At Government House, the NFP delegation tells Ratu Sir George Cakobau of the NFP's decision to finally form a government
- 10:15 NFP delegation leaves Government House and returns to Opposition office
- 10:45 Ramrakha on behalf of the NFP issues a statement that it would form a government and that whoever would be appointed party leader would be the new Prime Minister. Independent parliamentarian Ratu Osea Gavidi arrives at Opposition office with Apisai Tora
- 11:00 NFP members vacate Opposition office and move to members' room to elect their parliamentary leader

Leader and Cabinet

- 11:00–2:00 NFP parliamentarians elect Siddiq Koya as leader and Captain Atunaisa Maitoga as deputy leader. Members interviewed for their preferred portfolios
- 3:15 The NFP tells the Governor General's Private Secretary that its leader is ready to be sworn in as Prime Minister
- 4:15 Siddiq Koya leaves Government Buildings for Government House to be sworn in as independent Fiji's second Prime Minister
- 4:20 Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau leaves Government House by private Range Rover
- 4:45 Koya leaves Government House after being told Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara has been sworn in as Prime Minister
- 5:00 Ratu Mara calls a meeting of Alliance parliamentarians in his office to form his Cabinet. Koya confers with his parliamentarians
- 6:00–6:30: The events of April draw to a close after statements by Ratu Mara and Ramrakha

PRIME MINISTER: NOT TO BE

Soon after 4 pm, Koya left for the Government House with Subramani Baswaiya, Ro Asela Logavatu and Timoci Naco. Upon arrival, the group was told that the Governor General had already appointed Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara as the new prime minister. This he had done acting in his 'own deliberate judgment.' The Alliance leader had been summoned to the Government House at 3:45. Mara accepted the appointment, he said, in the same manner Fijians had always heeded the call of chiefs: 'I obeyed the command of His Excellency the Governor General, the highest authority in the land and my paramount chief. I obeyed him in the same manner that thousands of Fijians obeyed their chiefs when they were called to arms — without question and with the will to sacrifice and serve.'⁷² He expressed 'complete surprise' at the invitation to form a minority government. 'I think I must be the first Prime Minister in history to be appointed in a bula shirt.'⁷³ Reading a statement reportedly drafted by the Chief Justice, Sir Clifford Grant, Ratu Sir George said:

In the recent elections the people have Fiji did not give a clear mandate to either of the major political parties. It therefore became the duty of the Governor General under the constitution to appoint as Prime Minister the member of the House of Representatives who appeared to him best able to command the support of the majority of the members of the House. The Governor General has not been able to act sooner as it was not until this afternoon that he was informed who had been elected leader of the National Federation Party. The Governor General, after taking all the relevant circumstances into account, has come to the firm conclusion that the person best able to command the support of the majority of members is the leader of the Alliance Party, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. In compliance with the constitution and acting in his own deliberate judgment, the Governor General has accordingly appointed Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara as Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is now in the process of forming government.⁷⁴

The Alliance made much of the fact, and as Ratu Mara said on several occasions later, that he had no choice but to accept the appointment because the country 'was drifting rudderless without a government for four days.'⁷⁵ This is an overstatement. The final results were known on 4th, and the NFP informed the Government House of its ability to form a government on the 7th. In most democracies of the world, the period of transition is often much longer, lasting several days, if not weeks. The Alliance could have been asked by the Governor General to continue in a caretaker mode until the new government was sworn in within a few days. That would have been the correct procedure to follow. In the event the Alliance refused to obey the Governor General's orders for whatever reason, the Governor General himself could have assumed executive authority until the new government was sworn in.

The constitution expressly authorized the Governor General to assume direct control in the event of an emergency or when the safety of the state was at peril. The latter was clearly not the case, but the Governor General had the constitutional power to act on his own. The delay simply became an excuse to orchestrate the result he wanted. The 'crisis,' which was in truth no crisis at all, was opportunistically manufactured. 'What we told the Governor General,' Koya told the nation, 'was that we would exhaust all avenues of ascertaining whether a coalition government could be set up headed by Ratu Mara.' It was an historic gesture without parallel, he said, and magnanimous too, made in the 'wider interest of the nation and with regard to the future.' What was astounding, Koya went on, was that the Governor General had appointed a minority government without prior consultation with the NFP, which had the moral as well as the legal right to form the next government. The Alliance was playing hard ball. It knew of the internal problems in the NFP and did not want to make life any easier for them, hoping to use the contrived 'crisis' to their advantage at the next elections. As Siddiq Koya said, 'the talk of a caretaker government arose only because the Alliance Party took it upon themselves to tender their resignation without waiting for another day or another hour after they found

out that they had been beaten at the polls.⁷⁶ This was not the last time, as we shall see, that Ratu Mara would accept a controversial appointment, justifying his action as being in the national interest.

Koya cried foul and pledged to regain what he said was rightfully his and his party's. It was a curious situation alright, Ramrakha recalled: there was a government in place without a majority, and there was a majority in parliament without government.⁷⁷ The Alliance could not accept defeat 'in the ordinary way,' Koya argued, adding: 'If they did not believe in democracy, and they have exhibited they do not, they should have told us long ago instead of indulging in secret meetings and last-minute decision to change from one stand to another.' The Alliance's decision to accept the invitation to lead a minority government, Koya said, 'was an insult to the Indian community and its self-respect.'⁷⁸ Mara was planting fear in the minds of the people, Koya claimed. 'One day Ratu Mara may be called the Idi Amin of Fiji,' he thundered. 'I am watching him very carefully.'⁷⁹ Mara had often said that it was not only NFP's right to form the new government but its duty to do so, but when offered the opportunity to lead a minority government, he had accepted it without hesitation.

Why, then, was Siddiq Koya not appointed Prime Minister? That question continues to be asked and raised in political rallies against the supporters of those who had allegedly 'prevented' Koya from claiming the top political office, or 'stabbed him in the back' as the phrase went, and still does. Did some of his own colleagues secretly contact the Governor General and inform him of the internal dissensions and of their unwillingness to serve in a Koya-led government? Was the Governor General constitutionally correct in appointing Mara Prime Minister? Was Koya not supported because he was a Muslim in a Hindu-dominated party? And what were the consequences of Reddy's intervention? We have already disposed of the argument that the delay was, or could have been, an important factor in influencing the Governor General's decision to appoint a minority government.

The religion argument had its moment of play in the subsequent history of the NFP. Koya himself told an Indian journalist, Syed Naqvi,

in 1987, a full decade after the events, that 'Jai Ram Reddy and his supporters, all NFP members, withheld support because they did not want a Muslim Prime Minister.'⁸⁰ Why he accused Reddy later of being the Hindu ringleader when Irene Jai Narayan and Karam Ramrakha were more experienced and prominent leaders of the party, when Reddy had actually asked Koya to get sworn in first before worrying about the composition of his cabinet, is perplexing. Interestingly, Koya never made that accusation against Reddy personally in Fiji. Indeed, he returned to parliament under Reddy's leadership later, and said that relations between him and Reddy were characterized by 'understanding and compassion despite our differences.'⁸¹ Koya had previously in all general elections since 1963 won his seat from constituencies which were predominantly non-Muslim. And he was elected leader of a party the majority of whose members were Hindus. Among his staunchest supporters (as would be shown in the following September elections) were Hindus, including Subramani Baswaiya, Koya's choice for Finance Minister, Ram Sami Goundar, Shardha Nand, Vijay Parmanandam, Ujagar Singh, Kallu Karan Singh, and many others, all NFP members. And in the 1992 elections, Koya endorsed Reddy's candidature. His colleagues withheld their support from Koya not because he was a Muslim, although for some this may have been an issue, but because of the kind of politician he was and the positions he had taken on issues of great importance to the Indian community, including sugar and land. Opinion against Koya had polarized over a long period of time, it should be remembered, not just during the campaign. Many of his own colleagues had crossed the floor to vote for ALTA against their leader. Their opposition to Koya was thus political, not religious.

Koya knew the truth and was careful himself never to repeat the religious argument in public; but he was too astute a politician to quash the suspicion for good. He had nothing to lose but everything to gain politically by its persistence. When the subject was raised with Reddy a few years later, he said this: 'We fought Mr Koya because we differed on issues rather than because he was a Muslim. When the Prime Minister [Mara] was attacking

Mr Koya, nobody said that he was doing so because he was a Muslim.' He continued: 'Why don't they tell you that for eight years we accepted Mr Koya as Leader, worked under him and helped him win elections. Now after five years we have brought him back and given him a ticket. Not only him, we have given four safe seats to our Muslims, two communal and two safe national seats which we will win, and if God wants, then in the future, the Leader of the Party can again be a Muslim.'⁸² Koya, for his part, said that 'I have always admired his ability and we are certainly going to miss him,' when Reddy resigned from parliament in 1984.⁸³

Koya told his colleagues after returning from Government House that Ratu George had given two reasons in defense of his action. One was security. As recalled by an eye witness, Ratu George said to Koya, 'Sid, the security reports are bad.' Koya responded: 'Sir, leave security to my government.' To which the Governor General replied, 'No, I have already appointed Ratu Mara as Prime Minister.'⁸⁴ The other factor in the equation was his view that Ratu Mara was the man most likely to command majority support on the floor of the House. If the latter is correct, then it is fair to assume that some members of the NFP must have informed the Governor General of their plan to vote for Ratu Mara for Prime Minister. Two prominent leaders fingered early and often as the probable culprits were Karam Ramrakha and Irene Jai Narayan, both of whose dislike of Koya and their long opposition to him was public knowledge. So, it made sense to suspect them. But both denied under oath in parliament, swearing on the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana* respectively, ever communicating with Government House on the matter.⁸⁵ Swearing by religious texts is taken most seriously by Hindus, for telling lies on oath is believed by all devout followers of the faith to bring the most severe divine retribution not only on themselves but on other family members. The curse lasts for generations. Religion is never taken lightly among Indo-Fijians. Going by the oath alone, I have no reason to doubt Ramrakha's and Narayan's claim of innocence in the matter. Their only communication was that which was authorized by the parliamentary group. But Koya remained unconvinced, saying that remarks by Ratu Mara

‘insinuated’ that Narayan had written a secret letter pledging her support for the Alliance leader. Ratu Mara, having ‘insinuated,’ refused to clear the air. It made political sense for him to have his opponents squabble among themselves. But there was no proof and no evidence, the claim clearly intended to malign Mrs Narayan.⁸⁶ This led Narayan to say ‘very plainly and frankly that I will never cooperate with Koya and Tora. It is against my principle.’ But of course she would a few years later, without fruition.

It is highly unlikely that junior members of the party would have contacted Government House on their own, though Koya accused defeated independent candidate against him, RD Patel, of contacting the Governor General.⁸⁷ Be that as it may, the written record is clear. In an open letter to the Governor General, written on 25 May (reproduced), all 26 NFP parliamentarians accepted Koya as their leader and indicated their willingness to serve under him. The letter said: ‘We assure Your Excellency that we stand as a united party and that each and every signatory to this letter will serve as a Minister under Hon SM Koya as such responsibility is allocated to him under the Constitution of Fiji.’

As Dr Shams-Ud-Din Sahu Khan, a constitutional lawyer with a doctorate on the Fiji (1970) Constitution, pointed out, the Governor General could act in his own deliberate judgment, but he had to go by more than a hunch or suspicion. ‘Even if the NFP did take some time to choose a leader, and even if it was not a unanimous decision, it does not necessarily follow that those who opposed Mr Koya’s appointment would oppose him in parliament.’ ‘This is one of the principles of democracy,’ Sahu Khan continued. ‘There is bound to be opposition but when the majority expresses its support for a leader, that person is the leader.’⁸⁸ He argued that ‘unless it could be shown that there were at least two or three members of the NFP supporting Ratu Mara, the Governor General’s action had no constitutional basis.’ The claim then that Koya was not made Prime Minister *because* of divisions in the party, *because* he was ‘stabbed in the back,’ rings hollow.

Not much at the time was publicly made of the ‘security’ argument, but circumstantial evidence, mentioned then by many close observers, alerts

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

C/- Leader of the Opposition's Office,
Government Buildings,
SUVA

25th May, 1977.

His Excellency the Governor-General,
Government House,
SUVA.

Your Excellency,

We, the undersigned members of the House of Representatives request you to invite the Leader of the majority party in the House of Representatives namely the Hon. Mr S.M.Koya to form the government of Fiji who in our considered view commands support of the majority of the members of the House of Representatives.

We assure your Excellency that we stand as a united party and that each and every signatory to this letter will serve as a Minister under Hon Mr S.M. Koya as such responsibility is allotted to him under the Constitution of Fiji.

Yours faithfully,

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. S.M. Koya | 2. K.C. Ramrakha |
| 3. J.R. Reddy | 4. C.A. Shah |
| 5. C.S. Pillay | 6. K.K. Singh |
| 7. H.C. Sharma | 8. E. March |
| 9. A.V. Tora | 10. S. Basawaiya |
| 11. A. Maitoga | 12. I. Nadalo |
| 13. Sarvan Singh | 14. Santa Singh |
| 15. S. Prasad | 16. A.V. Logavatu |
| 17. I. Narayan | 18. T. Naco |
| 19. S. Tuiwainikala | 20. B. Crampton |
| 21. R.S. Gounder | 22. K.N. Rao |
| 23. A. Kuver | 24. H.M. Lodhia |
| 25. S.N. Kanhai | 26. C.P. Sharma |

Letter refuting claims that NFP did not support Koya for Prime Minister.

Courtesy of Fiji National Archives.

us to other possibilities and explanations. It was said that just before Koya and even Ratu Mara arrived, a black car, with Ratu Penaia Ganilau in it, was seen leaving Government House. Of all the high Fijian chiefs, Ratu Penaia was the most widely trusted by ordinary Fijians as the uncompromising champion of their rights, their most powerful defender in government. He was the one chief with ears closest to Fijian opinion on the ground. He, it is speculated, went up to Government House to warn the Governor General of the potential consequences of appointing an 'Indian' as Prime Minister, and Ratu George Cakobau listened to him. It should be remembered that Ratu Penaia was also in the Government House, this time as Governor General, when the coup took place in 1987. He was widely believed to be the patron and protector of Sitiveni Rabuka.

If Ratu George Cakobau had security as one reason not to appoint Koya Prime Minister, then the importance of Ratu Penaia in the equation becomes significant. It then does not matter what Ratu Mara did or did not do, whether he had foreknowledge of what was about to transpire at Government House, whether Koya turned up late or if he had turned up at the moment the victory of his party was announced, his fate was already sealed the moment the election results became known. He would not have been appointed Prime Minister under any circumstance. The delay in forming government provided the Governor General the perfect excuse to deny Siddiq Koya his due. 'The enormous lesson that the Federation people must learn,' Dr Lindsay Verrier wrote, 'is, of course, the cost of not being ready. If they had been able, at the moment the final poll was declared, to present a list of their leader and his or her Cabinet, the matter would have closed then and there.'⁸⁹ It might have, though it is doubtful. The excuse for executive intervention would have been different, but an intervention there would have been. Minds about that were already made up.

Ratu George Cakobau was not the neutral, impartial Head of State that people sometimes assumed him to be. His own political background needs to be borne in mind as well in assessing the final outcome of the crisis. Throughout the 1960s, he had been the most ardent defender of Fijian in-

terests, the clearest and most unrelenting advocate of the view that at independence, Fiji must be returned to Fijians who had ceded the islands to the United Kingdom in the first place. Cakobau had been a prominent presence at the post-1968 by-election rallies at which Fijians in their hundreds throughout Viti Levu had threatened to unleash race riots, terminate land leases, deport Indian leaders just because the NFP had been returned with larger majority. This was to be expected, to some degree, as Ratu George was, after all, the Vunivalu, the Warlord, of Bau and the highest chiefs of all besides being a direct descendant of the chief who had ceded Fiji to the United Kingdom in 1874: Ratu Seru Cakobau. It was his traditional cultural responsibility to stand by his people.

An incident in the 1970s also indicates Cakobau's inclination to act on his own advice, contrary to the constitutional requirements of his office. In 1977, when the position of Chief Justice became vacant, upon the expiry of Sir Clifford Grant's contract, Ratu Mara nominated Sir Ronald Kermode as his nominee for the position while Opposition Leader Jai Ram Reddy recommended High Court Judge Ghananand Mishra. Ratu George disregarded the advice of both the Prime Minister as well as the Leader of the Opposition (to whom he had written earlier) and appointed Timoci Tuivaga as Chief Justice instead.⁹⁰ Not only did the Governor General disregard the Westminster convention of the Head of State acting on the advice of the democratically elected government of the day, he also breached one of its most enduring traditions. Whether Ratu Mara or Siddiq Koya had the confidence of the parliament to form government was not for the Governor General to pre-empt, but for the House of Representatives to decide. Ratu George's intervention robbed the House of one of its most important functions. The Governor General, and the Governor General alone, and not Jai Ram Reddy or Karam Ramrakha or Irene Jai Narayan, prevented Siddiq Moidin Koya from becoming Fiji's second Prime Minister.

Mercifully, in light of Fiji's subsequent experience when heads of states chose to play God with the constitution, the impasse did not last for too long. In May, at the first sitting of the House of Representatives, the Alliance

moved a vote of confidence in the government, hoping for some defections from the NFP to its side, putting the dissidents in the party on the spot. But Tora moved an amendment 'that the will of the people of Fiji as expressed through the secret ballot should be respected in order to maintain parliamentary system of government in Fiji and therefore requests His Excellency the Governor General not to dissolve the Parliament, should an advice in that behalf be tendered, but to invite the Leader of the majority party in the House, namely the Leader of the Opposition, to form Government.' The Governor General could have used his 'own deliberate judgment,' taking into account the unanimous NFP support for Koya, to appoint him Prime Minister. He did not. Instead, he heeded Mara's advice to dissolve parliament and call for fresh elections. There was inconsistency here: in one instance, he acted in 'his own deliberate judgment,' and in another on the Prime Minister's advice (in the same crisis). The Alliance counted on regaining its lost Fijian ground, and the NFP feared losing some of its national seats which it had won through the narrowest of victories to the Alliance. For the recently defeated party, early elections offered much promise.

To revert to Reddy, the question to be asked is why did he make that statement at all? It should have been made by the party's three most senior leaders: Koya, as party Leader, Irene Jai Narayan as party President, or Ramrakha as the General Secretary. Some things are now clear. First, although a freshman, Reddy enjoyed respect in the party and was already regarded as a future leader, and the statement reflected his stature and authority. Second, the statement also reflected truly what Reddy was all about. He spoke his mind, honestly and truthfully, without regard to the political consequences of the statement for himself or anyone else. What was good for the country was first and foremost in his mind. This is what Reddy said at the time: 'I honestly believe that the time has come for people of moderate views who love this country and respect each other and care for all humans to come together and join forces for the welfare of this country.'⁹¹ The 'real' politicians in the party shared his view, and were glad that Reddy had uttered publicly what they all felt privately.

Many had voted against Koya in the past because they disapproved of his style of politics. Deep in their hearts they probably felt that Koya was not a suitable Prime Minister material. But they all refrained from speaking out publicly for fear of political retribution, or falling out of favor of one faction or the other, not knowing which one might come out on top in the end. Many did not know which side of the bread was buttered, as the expression goes in Fiji. As Irene Jai Narayan said, Reddy was a 'person with the courage of his conviction' who was 'honest enough to make that statement because that statement of his reflects the genuine fears of the Indian community.'⁹² The third thing that can be said is that Koya had foreknowledge of the statement, encouraged it, but when Reddy was attacked for his 'stab-in-the-back' statement, he said nothing publicly, dodged the issue completely.⁹³ Koya's strategy was simple. He had put Reddy in the front line, but refused to provide him support when it was needed. This, Karam Ramrakha said, was classic Koya *modus operandi*: 'always to sit back, wind up his soldiers, and let the pawns march into battle. He rarely made the accusations himself.'⁹⁴

For decades, Reddy's statement caused great debate in the Indo-Fijian community. It was thrown back at him constantly throughout his career, especially by people who had never carefully read it, as an act of supreme treachery by a man against his own leader at moment of great crisis, as well as opportunity, for the party and the community. One letter writer to the *Fiji Times*, future Lautoka lawyer Rajendra Chaudhry, called Reddy's statement 'the most baseless, self-defeatist and politically immature statement of the times.'⁹⁵ There were many who echoed that view in meetings and political rallies that followed. But there were supporters as well. Throughout, Reddy was unrepentant, pointing instead to both the accuracy as well as the prophecy of his remarks. In 1993, he told journalist Joe Nata (who would later do time in jail for supporting George Speight's coup): 'In a sense I was very prophetic. I saw ten years earlier what happened in 1987 and this time with a Fijian Prime Minister [Dr Timoci Bavadra] at the helm and seven well educated Fijians in Cabinet.'

His detractors, he said, ‘who cling to what I said then should have at least given me [some] credit.’ He continued: ‘We just did not have a working majority. It would be childish of many to pretend that these cleavages and divisions did not exist.’⁹⁶

There are two things about the April debacle that remained with Reddy. He was incensed at the persistent allegation that he had deliberately undermined Koya’s chances of becoming Prime Minister by his statement over the radio. He later recalled how he was hounded like a common criminal by his detractors for speaking the truth as he saw it, for his courage of conviction. The charges of disloyalty stiffened his resolve to clear his name which then catapulted him into politics. And the second is a lingering regret about something he should have done at the time but did not, which probably deeply disappointed Koya. He should have insisted at the first parliamentary caucus after the April elections that Koya be nominated by the party for Prime Minister without holding elections for leader as the party constitution required. After all, Koya had taken the party to victory, and he should have been allowed to take it into government without the formality of an election. That would have been the just and fair thing to have done. But why didn’t he? He was a new member of the parliamentary caucus, he says, and more senior members of the party, including Ramrakha and Irene Jai Narayan, insisted that the proper protocols and procedures should be followed. Given the battles of the recent past, they had no reason to short-circuit established party rules. Rules became an excuse to punish Koya for his past sins and lapses.

The mood of those tense few fateful days in early April 1977 is difficult to capture now. There was a pervasive sense of fear and apprehension. The talk around the tanoa bowl was subdued. A bus driver recalled: ‘I froze. My foot remained on the clutch lever for fifteen minutes. I wondered what would happen now.’⁹⁷ An event had occurred which had not been anticipated and in the eyes of many, should in fact have never happened. But what is perhaps most remarkable in hindsight is the calm manner in which the Governor General’s decision was received by the people on all sides

of the political divide. There were no protest marches, no rallies around the country, no court challenges contemplated. Koya carefully aimed his criticism at the Alliance party and its leader, but even that was surprisingly muted. No one criticized the Governor General. There were no calls for his resignation. For acting in a similar fashion the Australian Governor General, Sir John Kerr, was mercilessly hounded out of office and forced into voluntary exile.

In Fiji, Ratu George's decision was accepted as *fait accompli*. It was even received with relief. Ratu George had done what most people across the political landscape had wanted in the first place, including many supporters of the National Federation Party. Instead of anger, there was a palpable sense of gratitude, despite formal, almost obligatory protest in the parliamentary debates, and Ratu George continued to enjoy wide public respect. Not even Koya's most ardent supporters questioned his controversial intervention. Instead, they turned upon each other. It was Ratu George's good fortune that his fateful decision escaped close public scrutiny. But the Governor General's critical role cannot be denied. It was he who had robbed Koya of his right to form government. In this regard, Karam Ramrakha's assessment was accurate. Whatever the allegations about betrayal and treachery, the 'brute and undeniable fact,' he said, 'is that when Mr Koya went to the Governor General to become the Prime Minister, the Governor General, and the Governor General alone, refused to make him prime minister. We have a written constitution,' he said, 'and it is a pity that the constitutional processes were not allowed to take their course.' Jai Ram Reddy simply characterized Ratu George's intervention in the political crisis as a 'palace coup.'

On 26 April, when the newly-elected parliament met, Karam Ramrakha proposed a 'bold' plan to force the Governor General to give power back to the NFP. 'The Governor General's refusal to let NFP form a Government has been distorted to mean our failure,' he wrote to his parliamentary colleagues. This propaganda, he said, was being spread not only by the Alliance but by some the party's own supporters. 'The party must

correct this false impression.' To that end, he proposed to appoint a NFP Speaker, have him suspend the standing order to enable a no-confidence motion to be passed and the House to be adjourned *sine die*. 'In this way, we at least show we have control of parliament. We then write to the Governor General to exercise his deliberative judgment to set up NFP Government in power.' The NFP had lost government and it should not lose parliament 'otherwise we would be condemned for ever.' It was a bold plan alright, but with little prospect for success. As Sir Vijay Singh pointed out, 'A motion of no confidence in a government is as important a motion as could be introduced and it is unthinkable that any impartial and responsible Speaker would grant leave allowing its introduction by surprise and without notice.' Any Speaker 'who duly complies with such application would soon lose the confidence of the House and respect of the public at large.'⁹⁸

The decision to hold general elections in September was not welcomed unanimously by members of the National Federation Party. In fact, opinion was sharply divided. Some in the party, including Koya, thought that early elections would play straight into the hands of the Alliance. He was right in that assessment. Some parliamentarians who had been elected from marginal national constituencies feared losing their seats. And their loss, because many of them were supporters of Koya, could jeopardize Koya's chances for continued leadership. Some indeed saw in early elections a chance to eliminate once and for all any residual influence Koya had in the party. For his part, Koya was having talks with Jonati Mavoia, Leader of the House, to have the minority government remain in power for a year 'to calm things down.' That was not to be. The Alliance had everything to gain and nothing to lose by going to an early election.

THE SEPTEMBER DEBACLE

The patch on the punctured tyre, to use Vijaya Parmanandam's metaphor, that the National Federation Party had by then become, was quickly ruptured. Accusations about treachery and betrayal flowed freely in the media. Passion ran high. Fist fights broke out in meetings called by rival factions.

Reconciliation efforts were attempted, but came to naught. Koya's view that all the sitting members of parliament should be re-endorsed for election was not accepted, nor the suggestion that Vanua Levu be declared a 'neutral zone' for four unopposed national candidates. Eventually two factions crystallized, one around Koya, the Dove, and the other around Ramrakha and Irene Narayan, the Flower. The groupings were named after the symbols the Supervisor of Elections allocated to the two factions, denying the party symbol, the mango tree, to both of them. (Initially, the Dove faction had been offered a tractor and the Flower faction a fork, but neither had any campaign appeal or rallying power) As one observer put it, the tree that AD Patel had planted and which had provided shade and nourishment for so many for so long, had been destroyed by his followers. 'One group offers a piece of hibiscus bush instead [while] the Koya bird is flying around in confusion because it has no tree to rest on.'⁹⁹

After the April elections, Jai Ram Reddy was no longer 'a prominent Lautoka lawyer,' but a household name in the Indo-Fijian community. People talked about his captivating speeches and his dignified demeanour. Adhishwar Padarath reported that most NFP supporters were beginning to regard Reddy as the next leader.¹⁰⁰ But Reddy himself was reluctant to contest the elections, having had his fill in the first fractious round. He even contemplated giving Koya a seat by a united party so as not to split it, for he knew that once parallel candidates were fielded, the splits in the party and the community at large would inflict deep and lasting wounds. But party elders prevailed upon him to stand; not only stand, but to stand against Koya himself whose political demise they regarded as necessary for the peace and stability of the Indo-Fijian community.

There were many who thought if there was one person who could take Koya on and defeat him on his own turf, it was Reddy, not Karam Ramrakha, whose name was mooted, or anyone else. When Reddy agreed, the Flower troika of Ramrakha-Narayan-Reddy was created, but with no single face for the faction. At a meeting in Lautoka on 11 September, Mrs Narayan said that Jai Ram Reddy would become the leader if he won.

Her precipitous announcement pleased many. Reddy was a mesmerizing speaker, a fresh face, a voice of reason and moderation untainted by the political goings-on of the past. He inspired trust and confidence. He was a straight shooter. But Reddy's rapid elevation angered Ramrakha. As a senior party man, he thought he deserved consideration for the top job. For all his undoubted abilities, Ramrakha did not have a strong base in the areas where it really mattered: in the heartland of the cane growing country. The view there was that it was only natural for the party leader to come from an area where the party was born, and that was western Viti Levu. His plea to delay formally anointing the Flower leader, at least until he returned from Nauru, where he had gone on legal business, was rejected. Ramrakha apparently had Ratu Julian Toganivalu in mind as the next leader of the NFP to give it a broader base, a new face, somewhat in the manner of what the Fiji Labour Party did a decade later when it appointed Dr Timoci Bavadra as its leader. For Reddy, the Lautoka meeting was not to elect him leader, but merely to endorse a decision taken earlier that he would be the party's parliamentary leader if he won.¹⁰¹

Once the battle was joined, all of Reddy's hesitations and doubts disappeared. His commitment to victory at the polls was unwavering.¹⁰² Alliance quietly supported Reddy. Fred Caine told a rally in Lautoka that if given a chance, he would vote for Jai Ram Reddy, who 'was a person with dignity in parliament.'¹⁰³ Ratu Mara, for his part, added fuel to fire by saying that there was 'a greater possibility, a brighter possibility of racial harmony, if the Flower faction emerges as the opposition majority than Dove.'¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, the Alliance did not field a candidate in the Reddy-Koya contest, apparently because no one suitable was willing to be drawn into the fray. As the leader of the Flower faction, Reddy toured all the constituencies, speaking at all the major rallies and featured as their main attraction.

Old, familiar issues dominated the campaign. ALTA came in for its fair share of mention, and questions of betraying and misleading the community filled the airwaves and dominated the campaign rallies. Questions

were raised about the kind of leader the community needed to heal rifts within the community and build bridges with the other side of politics. Every household in the constituency was visited and re-visited, family, kinship, cultural and religious affinities and relationships mobilized for support. It was ever thus in Indo-Fijian constituencies at election time, but more intensely, more personally, so in this campaign than ever before. Covertly or overtly, everyone did it though assiduously denying any impropriety in public. The emotional fervour of the election rallies is difficult to capture now: the power and passion of words, the electrifying speeches and huge rallies, the enforcers ready on the side for any violence, which was an ever present possibility, lurking just beneath the surface. The September election was for the NFP nothing more than 'intra-party violence.' There was no time or space for big ideas and vision, no thought at all about winning the elections and forming the next government. That everyone conceded would not happen. The focus now was on trying to win for each faction as many seats as possible. It was a sad reflection on how far the National Federation Party had fallen. The embers from that September fires would linger long into the future.

It was a different story in the Alliance camp. It was well organized, well funded and purposeful, determined to woo back its traditional supporters and so regain government. Its focus was on Fijian voters; it knew it had no chance among the Indo-Fijians. Ratu Mara outlined his strategy to Wesley Barrett on 2 May, quoting an anonymous letter he had received, which said: 'The election has taught me several things. I learned that in Fiji's situation, the best propaganda in the world cannot break the tree syndrome. The tree touches on emotions and feelings that go far beyond party politics. Now I fear that the 'tabua' [the symbol of the Fijian Nationalist Party] is going to start to have the same meaning for the Fijians. That, in my estimation, is the most urgent problem facing the Alliance.'¹⁰⁵ To meet that challenge, Mara suggested a number of strategies. The Fijian Affairs organization had to be revitalized and made functional through rural development projects. Local party workers and coordinators in each

tikina makawa, should be closely in touch with the Turaga ni Vanua.' The Fijian members should 'know the relevant *veitaragi vanua* records and cultures of his constituency, and that includes planting of crops, catching of fish, prawns, etc, building of houses and specific variants to *yagona* ceremonies. Do not impose Bauan or Rewan ceremonial responses where they have their own.'

For the Alliance, it was back to the basics. And a clear warning was sounded in private and in public. Supporting Butadroka would jeopardize every gain the Fijians had made over the years. Worse of all, it could hand over power to the Indians, and nothing could be more unpalatable than that prospect. Their land rights would be in jeopardy, their future 'in their own homeland' endangered. The Alliance was what stood between the Fijian people and disaster. The campaign of consolidation was successful. Butadroka lost his seat to the Alliance's Tomasi Vakatora (The Fijian nationalist leader was in jail for breaching the Public Order Act by threatening racial peace and harmony). The Fijian Nationalist vote, 25 per cent of the Fijian communal votes in April, had declined to 12 percent. In the September elections, the Alliance captured 47 per cent of the total votes cast and over 80 per cent of the Fijian communal votes. It won 36 seats in parliament. The status quo was restored to the relief of many, and not only among the Fijians.

Among Indo-Fijians, the voter turnout was high, not surprising given the intensity of the campaign. The NFP, both factions combined, won 45 percent of the total votes cast and the overwhelming majority of the Indo-Fijian votes. The election was a clear victory for the Flower Faction which won twelve of the fifteen NFP seats. The only Doves to win were Vijay Parmanandam in Navua, RS Goundar in Rakiraki, and SN Kanhai in Nasinu-Vunidawa. In the most intensely contested seat of the entire general election, Jai Ram Reddy defeated Koya by 5638 votes to 4306. It was not a victory that Reddy savoured. He had beaten Koya and effectively ended his political career, but the victory had come at a great cost to the Indo-Fijian community, which lay divided as never before. The wounds would take a



Jai Ram Reddy, newly appointed Leader of the Opposition, September 1977, in his spartan office. Photo courtesy of Fiji Sun 'Reddy for Action,' the caption read.

long time to heal. Perhaps the one lasting legacy of the September elections was the widening division between Hindus and Muslims. The 1970s were the darkest years for the NFP. The party which had been in the forefront of the independence movement in the 1960s, with a powerful alternative vision for the country's future, had been reduced to frustrated, squabbling impotence. It had spent much of the decade fighting itself rather than fighting the Alliance, too hobbled by internal divisions to articulate a national vision as the government-in-waiting. Healing the cleavages and divisions of the past, retrieving the National Federation Party from the smouldering pit of near self-destruction, would be Jai Ram Reddy's principal task for the next few years.

INTERLUDE

JAI RAM REDDY: THE CUVU NFP CONVENTION ADDRESS, 1981

I extend to you all a very warm welcome to the 1981 annual convention of the Party. Some of you have travelled a long distance to be here today. Your attendance at this Convention, which is possibly the last before the next general elections, is much appreciated. The decisions we make today are bound to have far reaching effects for the party and the country. Equally important will be the way in which we make these decisions. Dignity and restraint should characterize our deliberations.

All eyes are on us at Cuvu today. As we prepare to go into the 1982 general elections, seeking a mandate to govern, we must remember that such mandate will only come our way if we can prove beyond all doubt that we are worthy of the trust we are asking the people of this country to repose in us. A disjointed, bickering and conflict-prone party will not inspire much confidence. People at odds with each other while in Opposition are not likely to behave any differently in Government. That simple truth must be self-evident to all. A party that seeks the reins of government has to be disciplined, efficient, and in all respects thoroughly businesslike. I appeal to one and all of you to conduct yourselves in a manner calculated to enhance the image and reputation of our Party.

You will recall that some two years ago we embarked upon a plan to reorganize the party and to get it functioning on proper Constitutional lines. We now have duly constituted branches with proper membership, and rules for election of office bearers and the selection of branch delegates. I know of the hard work put in by the branch officials and our organizing secretary to achieve this. I am

grateful to them for their sincere devotion to the Party cause. What is now important for all of us is to adhere to our Constitution and the rules, and our inability to do so will not inspire much confidence in our capacity to organize and live by the Rule of Law.

The task ahead is however no easier. We must continue to make branches more active, to increase their membership and to gear them up for the colossal job which the party will have to face before general elections. That will be the registration of voters. My information is that the authorities are thinking of compiling completely new Rolls. Although I have yet to be convinced of such a need, should they seek new Rolls, as they are likely to do, that will certainly create an incredible state of affairs. Imagine yourself faced with an election tomorrow. The first task then would be to compile Electoral Rolls in order to be able to conduct that election. In most democracies worth their name, the Rolls open soon after an election and close soon before the next one. In those countries once a voter gets on a Roll, he remains there until death. He can, of course, move his name from one polling station to another. I do not know why this simple exercise cannot be carried out in Fiji. Again, it is not clear what is wrong with the 1977 Rolls, or why it cannot be updated. But I do express serious concern at the proposed state of affairs.

You must remember that if our supporters care not registered, there is no way we can win an election, no matter how effective our campaign. So let us not be complacent. I also gather that the task of coordinating the registration of voters for the elections will fall on the district administration, and the burden of registration upon the political parties. If this happens, then we will have an enormous job ahead of us. A systematic and well organized registration campaign, to ensure that our supporters are registered is an absolute must. One cannot overemphasize the magnitude and importance of this task.

The party must also have policies. People of this nation are entitled to know what an NFP government will do. Whether we will be radically different from the Alliance; whether we will have any leaning to the Left or to the Right, or whether we will pursue a middle course. Every investor and businessmen is already asking these questions. We must give them, and the nation, a clear answer.

I am happy to report to you that with the help of a few well wishers I have now in my possession a comprehensive Manifesto for the party. I am sure that when this Manifesto is published, it will put to rest a lot of unworthy speculations about the aims of our Party. I will at an appropriate time submit this document to the Policy Planning Committee of the Party, so that it can be adopted for use at the next general elections.

However, I will today raise a few issues fully covered by the Manifesto because, time and again, the NFP has been misquoted, sometimes deliberately, to allay fears in the minds of the people, particularly the Fijian people and the Business sector about our stand on issues like land and commerce.

I know that some politicians are going around saying that if the NFP came to power it will take away the land of the Fijians. This is not only nonsense, but irresponsible propaganda. No one, I repeat no one, can or will take away anyone else's land. We are all committed to live by the laws. And the supreme law of the land is the Constitution of Fiji. That Constitution protects the ownership of all land and especially Fijian land in a way which is probably unique in the world. Section 63 of the Constitution states that any law affecting Fijian land cannot be changed unless two-thirds of the members of the House of Representatives and the Senate and 6 out of 8 nominees of the Great Council of Chiefs vote in favour of the change. In other words, 3 nominees of the Great Council of Chiefs can veto any proposed change.

It is perhaps worth reminding the country and our Fijian friends that it was the NFP which proposed the creation of the Senate at the London Constitutional Conference in 1970. This was done for the protection of the Fijian people, and their special rights, including those to their land. It was this gesture on our part which made the Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, want the Great Council of Chiefs to thank the then Leader of the Opposition for his supportive attitude during the Conference. It is therefore ironical that the NFP should today be accused of wanting to interfere with that very right which it initiated for the benefit of the Fijian people.

However, to remove any doubts, let me reiterate in the most clear and unequivocal terms, that the NFP has no desire whatsoever, whether in power or otherwise, to interfere with the rights of ownership of the land of Fijians, or for that matter of anyone else. We are committed to the Constitution and to the rule of law. We will live by that and no one, absolutely no one, need have any fear on this score. I think this places a duty on all of us gathered here to counter such baseless propaganda. Our Fijian members have a special responsibility in this regard. They should explain the provisions of the Constitution in Fijian to their people. It is a great pity that men should exploit the fears of fellow men for political gain.

While I am on the question of land it must also be mentioned that ours is a nation of tenants. So to achieve greater employment opportunities and national development, the tenants too must have reasonable security. No citizen should live under a constant threat of eviction. To allow such a state is to deny a basic human right. All our people: the Fijians, the Indians, the Chinese and the Rotumans, yes all, are entitled to feel secure in the land of their birth.

Any discussion on the subject of land tends to become emotional. This is not the answer. It should be possible for us to discuss the

subject rationally and with understanding for the feelings of others, both the owners and the tenants. This can only be done if there is goodwill, cooperation and understanding between those who own the land, be they private freeholders, Native owners or the Crown, on the one hand, and those wishing to use that land, on the other. Any Government of this country has a crucial role in creating the right climate for such a cooperative endeavour. No one will lose by allowing useable land to be opened up for development. On the contrary, the landowners, tenants and the nation stand to gain. The landowners by having their land developed will derive additional income, and the tenants will gain by acquiring a means of livelihood and a measure of security for themselves and their dependents. The nation will gain by becoming more self-reliant and making greater foreign exchange savings. All this will also mean more jobs and better living standards for all our people.

This brings me to the question of employment. Unemployment is the single most pressing issue that confronts Fiji today, and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Let me say at once that this is a difficult problem, and one which is not unique to Fiji. There are no easy solutions. However, the problem has to be tackled methodically and vigorously, because nothing can be more disruptive to our national existence and to peace and tranquility than a large army of unemployed, specially the young. It has been repeatedly stated that Fiji is an agricultural country; that the greatest potential for job creation lies in this sector. Our aim should only be self-sufficiency but it must also look at becoming exporters of many agricultural commodities, processed or otherwise. We already have an excellent base with sugar cane.

Fiji has a competitive advantage in producing sugar. It has the knowledge, expertise, and the infrastructure for necessary expan-

sion. Consequently, the expansion of the sugar zone provides the easiest course of expansion for promoting developments to cover all geographic areas which have climatic conditions suitable for sugar growing. The scope for this initiative is the greatest in Vanua Levu (areas adjacent to Seaqaqa) and Tavua/Rakiraki. The Yaqara cattle farm which involves a sub-optimal use of land should be subdivided for the extension of the sugar zone. The extension of the sugar zone will also provide an opportunity for many Fijians to enter commercial agriculture. At the same time, the extension of the Vatukoula/Ra areas will also constitute an important regional development policy in view of the many uncertainties surrounding the economic lives of the Vatukoula gold miners.

Also marine resources in and around Fiji waters constitute great wealth, and a source of nutrition. We should seek to provide all assistance to develop a viable local fishing industry (unlike the present one which relies almost solely on foreign fishermen, foreign vessels and a government fishing company living off tax payer's money. The development of the fishing industry will also provide another commercial opportunity for the Fijian people, who are a sea-faring people with a natural aptitude for fishing.

The NFP has also been branded from time to time as a party with a policy of wholesale nationalization of business. It is not only madness for anyone to be thinking along those lines, but also suicidal for a country like ours to even attempt to do so. Far from it, the NFP recognizes that under the Alliance Government, rapid expansion in government consumption has led to an unduly large tax burden on income earners, and has consequently reduced incentives for people to work and for businessmen to invest. We will attempt to lower the tax burden. In any event, a

NFP Government will not allow the ratio of direct and indirect taxes to gross domestic product to exceed that borne by tax payers in 1981.

Taking into account the consumption pattern and nutrition requirements in the poorest section of our society, we will remove certain regressive elements in the tax system introduced by the Alliance. In particular, the indirect taxes on imports of basic food items such as wheat, rice and canned fish will be abolished. Rice and canned fish should not be subject to taxation until such time as sufficient structural adjustments takes place in the rice growing and fishing industries, and it becomes clear that production process is under way which could lead to self-sufficiency in these commodities.

In order to stabilize the economy, and to contain the rising tax burden, which has acted as strong disincentive for workers and businesses, we will contain the real operating expenditure of the Government, and will not allow it to exceed the real growth in the economy. This can be achieved by making an all-out effort to rationalize the operating expenditure of the Government, and by eliminating waste; examining critically the existing functions of the Government Departments, and looking for ways of consolidating a number of their functions. Non-essential, outmoded and counterproductive institutions and functions of Government departments will be eliminated. In addition, we will conduct international relations prudently, taking into account the costs and benefits of overseas representation of Fiji Missions.

At home, for domestic capital formation in the economy, we will accord it a high priority in view of the rising unemployment and low economic growth. In this area a two-pronged approach is possible. Firstly to increase budget allocation for high quality capital projects. In view of the shortage of funds the capital market must be designed

to give priority to those projects which are justified by their economic rate of return. We must undertake thorough project evaluation as an important instrument for screening projects. Secondly, the Government will need to work closely with private entrepreneurs and provide the necessary stimulus to increase investment and employment opportunities. In particular, the impact of Government regulations on private investments will be closely scrutinized, and the Business and Industrial Development Corporation (BIDC) which is a glaring example of counterproductive regulating body will be abolished.

No nation can prosper without freedom and protection of its citizens. The NFP will guarantee freedom under the law. Protection of the individual citizen is a prime duty of any Government. Strong action is needed to check the serious rise in crime and violence. The best deterrent to crime is a likelihood of being caught. We will strengthen the police force.

For the last four years, I have been advocating a new style of government, an open government. NFP will eliminate unnecessary secrecy concerning the working of the government, and will review the operations of the Official Secrets Act, so that government is more open and more accountable to the people. The functions and powers of government have expanded so much in recent years that the traditional safeguards of the citizen no longer suffice. Although we will reduce government activity and interference, a better system of control and examination of decisions by individuals concerned, public bodies, and local authorities which affect every citizen is also needed. Parliament during recent years has often passed legislation which has infringed individual rights and has given wide discretionary powers to Ministers. We will closely examine ways of safeguarding more effectively the rights and freedoms of individual citizen.

In closing, ladies and gentlemen, let me remind you that the whole country is watching us. It will judge our Party on the performance and outcome of this Convention. It will need to be convinced that when we disperse today, we do so as a strong and united Party. A Party not only willing to go into the next general elections but also ready and able to provide Fiji an alternative Government, a government which is honest, responsible, stable and decisive. The presence of so many of you here today reassures me of the strength of our Party. It also revitalizes our hopes and aspirations for the future.

Ever since becoming the leader of this Party, I have concentrated on two things. Firstly, to work towards the reunification of the Party [and] Secondly, to give the Party a Policy Base. I am convinced, and no matter what others say, that our Party is united and will remain united, because the rank and file want it that way.

Although we have been small in numbers in Parliament, we have tried to protect the public interest by raising issues of national concern. We have opposed Government where we had to and we have supported them where we were able to do so. We have worked to maintain a healthy political climate by confining actions as far as possible to issues rather than personalities. We have worked to maintain good race relations and to expose the Party to the people, fortunately to people of other races.

I know that some of you here may not agree with everything I have done. That is only natural, and I lay no claim to perfection. What we need is for every one of you to help prepare the Party for victory in the next elections. Let me assure the nation that if we win, we will form a Government. The fiasco of April 1977 will not be allowed to be repeated.

NOTES

1. The letter is summarised in Ahmed Ali, 'The Fiji General Election of 1972,' in *Journal of Pacific History* (1973), 171–180. Awasthi, who now lives in Melbourne, has confirmed to me his authorship of the letter.
2. Ramrakha to Lal, 17 Sept. 2004.
3. *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Oct. 1972. Ramrakha says he was promised 11 votes, but got only 4. He returned to his former duties in due course, chastened.
4. Ahmed Ali, 'The Fiji General Elections of 1972.'
5. Private communication. Rae was for a while an administrator in the Leader of the Opposition's office.
6. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, *The Pacific Way: A Memoir* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 105–106.
7. Ramrakha to Lal, 19 May 2003.
8. *Fiji Times* 1 June 1977.
9. A note of caution: Mara made a similar allegation against Jai Ram Reddy which I discovered to be patently false on account of incontrovertible documentary evidence. See later.
10. *Fiji Times* 5 Sept. 1977.
11. See Robert Norton, *Race and Politics in Fiji* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, rev. ed. 1990), 111–120.
12. For the implications of Butadroka's politics, see Ralph Premdas, 'Constitutional Challenge: The Rise of Fijian Nationalism,' *Pacific Perspective*, 9:2 (1980), 3–44.
13. Once when asked why he employed Indians on his poultry farm and not Fijians, he responded: 'Don't mix poultry with politics!'
14. *Fiji Times*, 16 Oct. 1975.
15. *Hansard*, 25 May 1975.
16. For this I am grateful to Pramod Rae, one-time administrator in the Leader of the Opposition's office.
17. *Fiji Times*, 10 Nov. 1976. The signatories included Anirudh Kuver, Harish Sharma, HM Lodhia, Irene Jai Narayan, Isikeli Nadalo, Surendra Prasad,

Sarwan Singh, Atunaisa Maitoga and Karam Ramrakha.

18. *Fiji Times*, 9 July 1976.
19. *Fiji Sun*, 10 Nov. 1976.
20. *Fiji Sun*, 12 Nov. 1976
21. In a speech in Cuvu, briefly reported in *Fiji Times* 13 Nov. 1976
22. See *Fiji Sun*, 16 Nov. 1976.
23. See Senate *Hansard*, 24 Nov. 1976 for Reddy's contribution to the debate on ALTA.
24. *Fiji Times* 19 Nov. 1976.
25. *Hansard*, 5 Mar 1998.
26. *Hansard*, 10 Feb. 1999.
27. See Adishwar Padarath's report in *Fiji Sun*, 17 Nov. 1976.
28. *Fiji Times* 19 Nov. 1976. MT Khan, Alliance Minister, refused to support the Bill and was sacked from the party, while Fred Elbourne, retiring Alliance member of parliament, was reportedly offered a Senate seat or a national seat if he refused to support ALTA. Among those present when the offer was made were Apisai Tora, Vijay Parmanandam, Ujagar Singh and CP Bidesi.
29. These were: KC Ramrakha, Irene Jai Narayan, Harish Sharma, Himmat Lodhia, Anirudh Kuver and Sarvan Singh.
30. See *Fiji Sun*, 22 Nov. 1976
31. For this I am indebted to Mr Karam Ramrakha for information and advice.
32. According to Robert Norton, Koya told SB Patel in 1977 that his (Koya's) stand on the \$2.50 issue was a mistake, but by then it was too late. Norton to Lal, 30 July 2009.
33. *Fiji Sun* 17 Mar 1977. See also *FS* 20 March and *FS* 7 March.
34. *Fiji Sun*, 17 Mar. 1977.
35. *Fiji Sun*, 3 March 1977.
36. *Fiji Sun* 9 Mar. 1977.
37. *Fiji Sun*, 1 April 1977.
38. This according to Karam Ramrakha who overheard the remark.

39. *Fiji Sun*, 4 April 1977.
40. *Fiji Sun*, 10 and 25 Jan. 1977.
41. I owe this to Karam Ramrakha (3 Jan. 2001) who recalls Reddy being visibly upset at the accusation, to the quiet amusement of Siddiq Koya.
42. *Fiji Times*, 15 May 1984.
43. *Fiji Sun*, 10 Jan. 1977.
44. *Fiji Sun*, 9 March 1977.
45. *Fiji Sun*, 21 March 1977.
46. Ibid.
47. As recalled by Pramod Rae. Personal communication from Pramod Rae, 23 October, 2009.
48. *Fiji Times*, 26 March 1977.
49. The recommendation was in *Education for Modern Fiji: Report of the 1969 Fiji Education Commission*. The Commission was chaired by Sir Philip Sherlock.
50. Ahmed Ali, *From Plantation to Politics: Studies on Fiji Indians* (Suva: Fiji Times and Herald, 1980), 196.
51. *Fiji Times*, 18 March 1977.
52. Ali, *Plantation to Politics*, 193.
53. *Fiji Times*, 4 April 1977.
54. *The Weekender*, 2 April 1993.
55. This according to what SB Patel told Robert Norton on 1 Aug. 1977. Norton to Lal, 30 July 2009.
56. According to Norton, this is what Patel said to Koya when the latter approached him: 'Hey, Sid, well, well, after all these years you come to me for help.'
57. See *Hansard*, 25 May 1977.
58. *Fiji Sun*, 3 May 1977.
59. *Hansard*, 25 May 1977.
60. *Fiji Times*, 6 April 1977.

61. This statement was published in the two dailies. My quote comes from typescript obtained from the Fiji Broadcasting Commission.
62. *Fiji Sun*, 26 May 1977.
63. Verrier's assessment, *Fiji Sun*, 2 June 1977.
64. See *Hansard*, 25 May 1977. Also *Fiji Times*, 20 Sept. 1977.
65. Written, it was widely speculated at the time, by Chief Justice Sir Clifford Grant.
66. According to Karam Ramrakha, the Governor General took Koya's full name, 'Siddiq Moidin Koya,' and asked that he come and be sworn in as prime minister as he commanded the majority support. Koya preferred not to go to Government House because he said Mara might not be amenable to a coalition government with him in it.
67. Letter published in *Fiji Times*, 9 Apr. 1977.
68. This information I owe to Karam Ramrakha.
69. Ramrakha's acceptance of the Attorney General's position is confirmed in his correspondence with me, 5 Sept. 2006.
70. See *Fiji Times*, 23 April 1977.
71. From *Fiji Times*, 9 Apr. 1977.
72. *Fiji Times*, 9 Apr. 1977.
73. *Fiji Times*, 26 May 1977.
74. This statement was published widely the newspapers, and broadcast over Radio Fiji. But see *Fiji Times*, 9 Apr. 1977.
75. *Hansard*, 25 May 1977.
76. These quotations are from the *Fiji Times* of April 1977. My photocopies do not have the dates on them.
77. *Hansard*. 31 May 1977.
78. *Fiji Times*, 11 April 1977.
79. *Fiji Times*, 12 September 1977.
80. 'Marooned at Home: A Demoralised (Fiji) Indian Community,' *India Today*, 30 Nov. 1987, 99.

81. *Fiji Times* 19 Aug. 1985.
82. *Fiji Times* 9 June 1982
83. *Fiji Times*, 21 May 1984.
84. As recalled by Pramod Rae, 16 Oct. 2009.
85. *Fiji Sun*, 2 July 1977.
86. *Fiji Times*, 22 Sept. 1977.
87. *Hansard*, 25 May 1977.
88. *Fiji Times*, 11 May 1977.
89. *Fiji Sun*, 9 Apr. 1977.
90. Based on Jai Ram Reddy's official correspondence on the matter, in my possession.
91. *Fiji Times*, 26 May 1977.
92. *Hansard*, 26 May 1977.
93. *Fiji Sun*, 23 May 1977.
94. *Fiji Sun*, 7 March 1987
95. *Fiji Times*, 23 May 1977
96. *The Weekender* 23 April 1993
97. Karam Ramrakha to Lal, 10 Oct. 2006.
98. *Fiji Times*, 27 April 1977
99. *Fiji Sun* 25 Aug. 1977.
100. *Fiji Sun* 23 Aug. 1977.
101. *Fiji Times*, 29 Sept. 1977.
102. *Fiji Times*, 5 Sept. 1977.
103. *Fiji Times*, 22 Aug. 1977.
104. *Fiji Times*, 5 Sept. 1977.
105. This letter is in a file of papers Len Usher gave to the John White Commission and is in the Commission's papers at the National Archives of Fiji.