

## CHAPTER 9: THE DÉNOUEMENT

*There is an evening coming in  
Across the fields, one never seen before  
That lights no lamps* Philip Larkin

*Now the dream decays  
The props crumble. The familiar ways  
Are stale with tears trodden under foot* R S Thomas

The sun was a ripe orange over the Nadi Bay as dusty campaign vehicles festooned with leaves and frayed party flags began arriving at the Nadi Sangam Secondary grounds at the back of the tourist town. In the corrugated iron shed there sat perhaps two dozen exhausted party supporters and hangers-on, drinking kava, killing time and pondering the events of the day and of weeks of what had been a gruelling campaign. This was the end of the road, with little else to do but to sit and wait for the results. Long gone by now was the euphoria of the early days when wild grog-talk floated around meetings predicting a massive victory for the party. Jai Ram Reddy was depressed and withdrawn, more than he usually was. He had been unwell, too, with erratic high blood pressure and a mini-stroke — a transient ischemic attack — he had suffered in Ba in 1998 — sometimes barely able to keep up with the hectic pace of the rallies and the media interviews. The experienced campaigner that he was, he knew in the latter stages of the campaign that he was gone. He had read the voting shed trends and the general mood of the voters accurately, and there seemed little he or anyone else could do to reverse the trend. But the occasion demanded a valedictory speech from him. He stood up to give what would turn out to be the last campaign speech of his political career in Fiji. The National

Federation Party had fought a good fight, he told his supporters, and he was proud of the principled way it had conducted the campaign. In life as in politics, one had to stand up for certain principles. He and his party had been honest and truthful with the people. He repeated the themes of the importance of multiracial cooperation and partnership, which was the only way forward for Fiji. He would accept the verdict of the voters, whatever it was. And whatever was to be the fate of individual candidates, the party, he said, would live on. Then, he sat down to a tired, desultory applause.

Later that evening, party supporters and officials gathered at the Natabua High School to witness the counting of votes. At the beginning, there was mild optimism. An outright victory seemed unlikely now, but a substantial number of seats were assured. From around the country came estimates of a 'fifty-fifty-chance.' I had been following elections long enough to know that that calculation spelled desperation, a euphemism for certain impending defeat. As the counting proceeded through the night and into the early hours of the morning, the extent of the devastation began to become clear. One by one, everyone had lost. The NFP did not win a single seat. Reddy's nemesis, Mahendra Chaudhry's 'Peoples Coalition,' comprising Labour, the Party of National Unity and the Fijian Association, won thirty seven of the seventy one seats, including all the Indian reserved seats. Rabuka's party, which had fought the election as NFP's coalition partner, did not fare much better either, winning only 8 Fijian seats.

Ironies abounded. Against all odds and all expectations, Mahendra Chaudhry was appointed prime minister, a prospect that had appeared implausible just a few weeks, even days, before the elections, and that, too, in coalition with a political party, the Fijian Association, whose overtures for political support to form government in 1992 Chaudhry had rebuffed. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, who not a long ago had been regarded as the evil genius behind the country's recent political troubles, was now hailed as an ally, a wise statesman providing sage advice to an inexperienced incoming administration. On the other side of the political divide, Jai Ram Reddy had joined hands with the SVT leader Rabuka whom he had refused to

support — but whom Chaudhry had supported — for Prime Minister a few years back.

The two dominant figures of contemporary Fijian politics, widely praised for their leadership in the constitution review exercise, overnight became generals without armies. Rabuka resigned from parliament to become a (commoner) chairman of the Great Council of Chiefs and the Commonwealth Secretary General's peace envoy to the Solomon Islands. For Reddy, also widely respected and admired for his contribution to the national healing process, the results were a fateful replay of history. His party under the leadership of AD Patel had played a leading role in Fiji's independence struggle, but was consigned to the wilderness of the Opposition benches for a generation in the post-independence years. Now, once again, Reddy and his party were dealt a crushing blow and destined for a place on the margins in the nation's affairs after helping deliver to the Indo-Fijian community and to the nation as a whole, the best constitution they ever had, and laying the foundations of a truly multiracial democracy in Fiji.

Jai Ram Reddy was under enormous pressure from his supporters to stay on to lead the party. People would one day come to their senses and realize the mistake they had made. Then his guidance at the helm would be much needed. Reddy was unmoved. He would remain a mentor and advisor, if that was what people wanted, but an active career as party leader was over for him.<sup>1</sup> Reddy had been a reluctant candidate in the first place, accepting an open seat at the last minute, much to the agony of his close supporters, and eschewing the Lautoka communal seats which he had won in the past and which offered better prospects. But all that was now history. 1997 would be his last campaign, Reddy told friends with palpable relief. He was at the end of his political career. He might not even see the full parliamentary term to conclusion. Reddy was deeply hurt and disappointed, not necessarily at his own defeat, although that would have been natural enough: the first and only in his long political career; but at the eclipse of the vision that the constitution had enshrined. Having masterminded it, Reddy would no longer be in the political arena to defend and protect his handi-

work from critics who were aplenty. People had not grasped the enormity of the achievement, Reddy lamented. This was a home grown constitution, passed unanimously by the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the Great Council of Chiefs. The constitution was the envy of the developing world, especially of ethnically divided societies, and his own people had shown scant regard for it. Perhaps the achievement had come too easily, he thought, without too much sacrifice for people to fully appreciate the enormity and significance of what had been accomplished in the most difficult of circumstances, and against considerable odds.

#### THE ROAD TO 1999

A general election was in the offing once the 1997 Constitution had been promulgated by parliament. Even as the Constitution Amendment Bill was being debated, Rabuka threw out a challenge to his colleagues on both sides of the House. 'Let us not just talk about the concept of multi-party government,' he said during a parliamentary debate, 'let us act on it. Let us start with it now so that we can develop the habit of working together well before the next General Elections.' And he repeated what he had been saying on many previous occasions: 'We have to move away from the ethnic divide that for the past five years has been a divisive and unhappy feature of this Chamber.' There were some within the NFP who cautiously welcomed the idea to capitalize on the euphoria which had gripped the country after the passage of the Constitution Amendment Bill, but Reddy vetoed it. 'We have to go to the people first to get their mandate before we take the next step,' he said. Besides, there was still a lot of leg-work to be done in preparation for the elections: constituency boundaries demarcated, registration lists drawn up, candidates selected, a manifesto prepared, and so on, and he did not want, just yet, to relinquish the important responsibilities that came with the office of the Leader of the Opposition. Reddy also did not want to be tainted with the mess the SVT government had created. He would then be an easy sitting target for his opponents. But he left no doubt in anyone's mind that he would go to the next elections in coalition with Sitiveni



*Launching the SVT–NFP–GVP Coalition at Kshattriya Hall, Suva, 1999.  
Seated from right: David Pickering, Sitiveni Rabuka, Robin Stork, Mere  
Samisomi, Viliame Cavubati, Wadan Narsey. Courtesy Fiji Times*

Rabuka's party. Reddy told Rabuka, 'You will not be isolated. We want a partnership. We don't want to go back.'

Meanwhile, there were other matters to attend to. Among them was canvassing support for Fiji's re-admission to the Commonwealth. On 9 September 1997, Rabuka wrote to Indian Prime Minister, Inder Kumar Gujral, about the promulgation of the new constitution with its non-racial and power-sharing features, and sent Reddy to brief the Indian leaders in person. Reddy also briefed them on the land question. He was well received in New Delhi. But Mahendra Chaudhry was not far behind. He travelled to India, on his own initiative, to meet both Prime Minister Gujral as well as Opposition Leader Atal Behari Vajpayee to talk to them about the 'long term future and security of people of Indian origin in Fiji,'<sup>2</sup> as if Reddy could not be trusted to represent their interest, or was in some way short changing them. The Indian leaders, Chaudhry said 'are expected to raise the concerns I had relayed to them regarding the Indian people.' His visit was widely criticized, but Chaudhry had a clear agenda: he was trying to paint Reddy in a particular light and himself as the true leader of the Indo-Fijian community who most cared about them.

It was not immediately clear what issues Chaudhry raised with the officials in New Delhi, but one most likely would have been land, in particular the plight of the Indo-Fijian tenants due to the imminent expiry of their leases under the thirty year Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act (ALTA). An attempt was made to tie ALTA and the Constitution together in Fiji's attempt to get re-admission to the Commonwealth. One without the other was useless, it was said, and Fiji should not be re-admitted unless the ALTA issue was resolved. But the two, though both important, were quite different. The land problem would have to be resolved through political dialogue with the Fijian landlords, not by taking it to the court of international opinion, Reddy said. He had already initiated dialogue with Rabuka on the subject. He hoped that the optimism generated by the constitutional review process would bear fruit in the discussions on the other issues. That, indeed, was the joint position of both the NFP and Labour. 'It is only after equal citizenship rights have been secured for all communities in Fiji,' a joint statement in February 1997 said, 'that we can begin to look at other national issues of concern, including the problem of land. Arriving at a fair constitution broadly acceptable to all the communities in this country is the first hurdle to be overcome, and given paramountcy over all other considerations.'<sup>3</sup> But now for obvious political reasons, the two issues were conflated.

When pushed, Reddy asked: 'How will staying out of the Commonwealth help resolve the ALTA problem?' In a statement, Reddy said that 'Fiji's re-entry into the Commonwealth has nothing to do with the leases expiring under the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act. In fact, NFP's support for Fiji's re-entry into the Commonwealth would help resolve the land problem. 'The Commonwealth espouses certain values which binds member states. Being out of the Commonwealth does not bind the Fiji government to adhere to those values and principles. By being in the Commonwealth, it is possible to raise grievances and concerns in that forum. Far from being a hindrance, our re-entry into the Commonwealth will help the resolution of ALTA.'<sup>4</sup> Chaudhry's strident utterances, on the other

hand, said his colleague Tupeni Baba, would only ‘confuse, cloud and aggravate the positive atmosphere in the country’.<sup>5</sup> ‘[O]ne thing Mr Chaudhry can be sure of when he returns [from India],’ editorialized the *Fiji Times*, is that ‘he will be isolated even more. The forward drive by the majority of the leasers and the people of this country is too powerful for any one man to stop.’<sup>6</sup> The paper would turn out to be wrong; one underestimated Chaudhry at one’s own peril. Chaudhry had another more precise and urgent agenda: Jai Ram Reddy. He had Reddy in his gun sights throughout the 1990s. Recall his promise to ‘finish NFP off.’ It was politically necessary for him to run Reddy down at every opportunity, to denigrate his every contribution no matter how big or small, and to shore up his own fortunes, especially among the Indo-Fijians. That he did single-mindedly and with great success between the promulgation of the constitution in 1997 and the general elections in 1999.

Elections involve many painstaking tasks: selecting candidates, preparing an election manifesto, seeking partnership with other like-minded political parties, getting a feel of the mood of the electorate, organizing rallies and pocket meetings, scrutinizing voter registration rolls. From the 1990s onwards, Reddy had been reaching out to NFP’s non-traditional constituencies, seeking their views and their inputs. To that end, he wanted the infusion of fresh blood into the party. He was on the lookout for credible candidates. He asked me to sound out Imrana Jalal, the Suva lawyer, feminist activist and then newspaper columnist, if she might be interested in contesting the Suva Indian communal seat left vacant by the death of the incumbent Harilal Patel. Imrana declined on account of her young family, but wanted the door kept open for the future. Reddy was then able to entice economist Wadan Narsey for the Suva seat, who entered parliament in August 1997 in an un-contested by-election, emerging later as an effective Opposition Finance spokesman.

There were other new faces in the line-up as well: educationist Keshwan Padiyachi, senior social welfare officer Manjula Verma, medical practitioners Bijend Prasad Ram and Mridula Sainath, academic Biman



*Consulting with Deputy NFP Leader Harish Sharma and Ba Mayor Praveen Bala. Courtesy of Fiji Times*

Prasad, senior school vice-principal and principal Vijendra Prakash and Savitri Chauhan respectively, and head teachers Davendra Pratap and Ram Lajendra, trade unionists Jagannath Sami, Diwan Shankar and Attar Singh (James Raman was already in parliament), big and small businessmen (Vinod Patel, Satish Gulabdas, Harnam Singh Golian, Maan Singh, Dharendra Kumar) and community workers (Mohammed Rafiq, Azam Khalil, Parmod Chand, and Aptar Singh). By the late 1990s, Reddy had gathered around him men and women of exceptional talent and aptitude. The eclectic 1999 line-up was, arguably, the finest the NFP (or Labour, for that matter) had ever presented to the electorate. 'At the end of the day,' Reddy remarked, 'the quality of government will be decided by the quality of its members.'<sup>7</sup> The team also had regional and cultural balance as well. These things matter among Indo-Fijian electorates. There were South Indians, North Indians, Gujaratis, Muslims, Sikh. For the first time in the party's history, three women were given what was generally thought to be 'winnable seats.' On this issue, Chandra Reddy had a large hand in persuading her husband to cast his net more widely.

Most of the newcomers were neither politically inclined nor possessed an experience of politics. Indeed, many expressed distaste for its raw and





*Listening on the campaign trail, 1999. Courtesy of Fiji Times*

rough character. Some former Labour Party members or others leaning in that direction, were wary of joining a ‘communal’ party such as the NFP, but they joined because they saw a genuine opportunity to make a difference. The time was right. Fiji seemed to be the cusp of a new era. Progressive political change and social reform seemed within grasp. A divisive past could finally be put to rest. Another, perhaps equally important, reason was the leadership of Jai Ram Reddy. He had won the sceptics and the critics over with his honest, inclusive and transparent approach, and his sensitivity to the concerns of the indigenous community. They saw in Reddy a leader open to fresh ideas and the possibility of change, unafraid of genuine intellectual debate. Reddy did not seem personally ambitious for power. He was the glue that bound the team together.

With the prospective candidates’ list in train, talks began about a coalition. Reddy had already said that he would go into coalition with the SVT, the mainstream Fijian party, and the General Voters Party headed by David Pickering. Reddy was not universally supported in this initiative. Some senior members thought that NFP should fight the elections on its own and then, if need be, join the SVT in government. The constitution provided for power sharing anyway, so there was no need to embrace a

Fijian party pre-election. Some warned of the Rabuka 'curse.' Coming too close to him would be disastrous for the party, just as it had been for Labour in 1994. Indo-Fijians, people said, had not forgiven Rabuka, and Chaudhry would do his best to ensure they did not. They warned of the perils of being laden with the SVT's baggage.<sup>8</sup> Supporting Rabuka for Prime Minister, as Chaudhry had done, was for many less heinous a crime than consummating a relationship with him and the SVT.

Reddy prevailed. He argued that a pre-election coalition was the only way to proceed. A coalition, he said, 'that shares common goals, ideas and policies is more likely to succeed than a post-election multi-party government of hitherto mutually hostile forces.' Another compelling case for a pre-election coalition was the need to bring together the different racial groups as partners in the electoral process in order to reduce communal tensions that had historically characterized elections in Fiji. He wanted to put an end to the long years of political rivalry between the different communities and to usher in a new era of political cooperation — consistent with the aims and objectives of the constitution. 'The valuable experience we have acquired during the making of the new constitution and the immense goodwill that has been shown by the Fijian people can be made the basis for solving many of our difficult problems such as ALTA, crime, unemployment, health and education. They cannot be solved through confrontation but by working together.'<sup>9</sup> 'You can't go into an election with battle lines drawn, acrimonious and divisive,' Reddy said, 'and then magically come back after the elections and say to everybody: please come and join us in this government of multi-party cabinet so that we can all together govern this country. You must understand human nature: it doesn't happen this way.'<sup>10</sup> He asked his people to take a longer term view of things. He told a thousand-strong rally in Nadi in February 1999 that 'We should learn from the past and live in the present which offers new openings. We don't want to fight for leadership. We can run the country in partnership with the SVT and at the same time ensure equal say and representation in parliament. Let us not repeat the situation which led to the 1987 coup — the fear of being

ruled. As long as the SVT is the voice of the Fijian people, we have to work hand in hand with them; we have to compromise with them.' Then he asked: 'What progress have we made in our political life by hanging on to this Fijian/Indian attitude?'<sup>11</sup>

This, by the late 1990s, was pure Reddy: focused on the long term interests of his community and the nation at large, rather than seeking narrow political advantage for his political party. There are some in the NFP who still question the wisdom of a pre-election coalition with Rabuka, but I think the decision was correct. There was the point about capitalizing on the momentum created by the promulgation of the constitution that Reddy mentioned. Having worked together with Rabuka so closely throughout the 1990s, Reddy could not, in good conscience, discard his partner-in-crime, so to speak, on the eve of the election for narrow political gain. The two had embarked on the journey together, and together they would see it through to the end, an unhappy end as it turned out. Reddy believed that the SVT represented the majority of the Fijian community. What Reddy did not know, and what no one had any way of knowing, was a silent ideological drift within the Fijian electorate away from Rabuka after 1997, although the sullen faces in parliament and the reluctant support for the Constitution Amendment Bill should have signalled trouble. Everyone was caught up in the euphoria of the moment. There was no way of assessing the impact of the withdrawal of the nominal sponsorship of the SVT by the Great Council of Chiefs, or the distancing from the party of influential chiefs, such as Ratu Mara. Had Reddy not gone with Rabuka, Labour would have played the issue to the hilt, portraying Reddy as a treacherous man who had left his political friend in a lurch, stabbed Rabuka in the back. 'Stabbing in the back' is a familiar refrain in Indo-Fijian politics.

## THE CAMPAIGN

Reddy was at pains to emphasize throughout the campaign that he had not joined a 'Rabuka government' and that, as the Leader of the Opposition, he had been at the forefront of efforts to demand greater transparency




and accountability from the government. As examples, he pointed to the Stephens' enquiry and the National Bank of Fiji saga. His demands for an enquiry into the NBF debacle had strained his relations with the government. His coalition with the SVT was not about the past, but about the future, about a new era of political cooperation. The coalition agreement with the SVT and the UGP provided that if the coalition won the elections, the leader of the SVT would become prime minister and the leader of the NFP the Deputy Prime Minister. This, a perfectly sensible approach in the context of the times, was decried by Labour as cowardice on Reddy's part, an unwillingness to lead, a repeat of April 1977 which had paralyzed the Indo-Fijian community. A radio interviewer asked: 'Mr Reddy, you are a seasoned politician, why don't you want to become Prime Minister?' Reddy replied, 'You have answered your own question, my friend. I am a seasoned politician: that is why I have taken this approach.' For Reddy, it did not matter who the prime minister was; what was important for him was that the vital interests of his people and of the country were catered for. Sir Vijay Singh thought the NFP's agreement with the SVT was an admission of the inferior political status of the Indo-Fijians. The NFP, he said, had 'declared itself disqualified from entry to the Muanikau manor.'<sup>12</sup> Reddy said that he had signed the deal 'because it allowed fair development of the Indian community with other communities,' adding 'If I wanted the post, I would have sold your rights a long time ago to become Prime Minister.'<sup>13</sup>

Another cornerstone of the NFP-SVT-GVP agreement was the sharing of the open seats. One option was for the three political parties to go their own way and, within an overarching agreement, compete for those seats. Reddy rejected that idea. Coalition partners could not compete amongst themselves and still manage to convey the impression of coherence. Clarity of purpose and conviction were necessary. They, therefore, agreed to share the open seats, with the SVT getting fourteen and NFP eleven. The two parties agreed to give their first preference to each other's designated candidates for the open seats, and not field parallel candidates, or support

independents or candidates from other parties. The Coalition would last until the next elections, with the parties agreeing to work together as coalition partners even if one of the parties won enough seats to govern in its own right. It was the spirit of power sharing rather than the strict letter of the law that underpinned the Coalition. The agreement finally provided for regular consultations to develop policy or resolve difficulties, but agreed to 'respect particular party positions in agreed areas where special group interests may be involved.'

This escape clause was similar to the one Reddy had negotiated with the Western United Front in 1982. It was necessary because there were areas where two parties had diametrically opposed positions. The privatization of public assets was one, and it served to highlight the difficulty the Coalition had in mounting an effective campaign as a cohesive unit, something which Labour exploited mercilessly. A major policy achievement for one party was a policy disaster for the other. The SVT government had sold 49 per cent of Amalgamated Telecom Holdings to the Fiji National Provident Fund and 51 per cent of the National Bank of Fiji to

**SVT/NFP/UGP Coalition Rally**








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 tomorrow, Saturday May 1st, 1999, at 10.00am.

**SPEAKERS:** The Hon. Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka (SVT),  
 Hon. Jai Ram Reddy, National Federation Party (NFP),  
 Hon. David Pickering, United General Party (UGP).  
 Hear the country's most experienced leaders and meet your coalition  
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Colonial for \$9.5 million, ostensibly to promote competition in the private sector. It had also sold 17 per cent of Air Pacific for nearly \$27 million to foreign airlines 'to strengthen the airline's international network and [increase] tourist arrivals,' and 51 per cent of the Government Shipyard for \$3 million to improve its 'competitiveness and [win] international orders.' These sales, the government argued, would free huge financial resources for growth in the private sector and enable it to 'focus more on improving the efficiency of its operations in the priority sectors, i.e., core and essential services.'<sup>14</sup>

The NFP, for its part, opposed privatization of state enterprises which were yielding high returns or covered strategic assets such as the international airport and shipping facilities, those which were undertaken purely to obtain funds to cover the recurrent financial deficits or which resulted 'in private companies obtaining monopolies which can be subsequently used to exploit consumers.' It supported the privatization of only those government-owned enterprises in which the government had no 'legitimate economic or social rationale for being involved, which were inefficient and constituted a drain on the tax-payer funds through subsidies and grants,' and where 'there were no significant compensating benefits to society in terms of employment, local resource use, or necessary social service.' All this was fine academic language, nuanced and measured, but communicating it to the electorate in clear, unambiguous terms, was another matter. The Peoples' Coalition, for its part, was upfront: 'strategic utilities such as water, electricity, telecommunications and civil aviation facilities must remain in public hands.' The sharpness in the clarity of message mattered. And it made a difference.

Another issue dividing the NFP and the SVT was the status of state land. As already mentioned, there are two types of 'Crown' or state land in Fiji: Schedule A (land owned by landowning *matagali* deemed to have become extinct at the time of Cession), and Schedule B (land which was unoccupied and had no claimants when the Native Land Commission met in the 1870s and 1880s). These lands were managed by the government


of the day for the benefit of the country as a whole. In the early 1990s, facing pressure from landless Fijians, the government devised a bill to return these lands to them and transfer their management to the Native Land Trust Board. For the SVT, conscious of the needs of its primary constituents, the indigenous Fijians, the policy made sense: it was the fulfilment of a policy adopted a long time ago of returning to Fijians what was thought to be rightfully theirs in the first place. The NFP was mindful of the impact this policy would have on Indo-Fijian tenants facing the imminent expiry of their leases.

The NFP also criticized the government's policy of setting aside \$2 million for purchasing freehold lands and giving them to the Fijians. It had been particularly vocal in its criticism of the setting up of the Viti Corps, a government initiative to provide agricultural training to unemployed Fijian youth on a freehold property in Navua it had purchased for \$7 million. Many in the Indo-Fijian community had hoped that this valuable piece of land could be used to re-settle farmers from around the country whose agricultural leases were beginning to expire. But the logic of the 1990 Constitution was still at play: the government had no electoral incentive to address the concerns of the non-Fijians. By the time it came around to it, it was too late. The NFP also disagreed with the government's strategies




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**JAI RAM REDDY**



**VOTE**

<b>JAI RAM REDDY</b>		
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**NFP** - *Co-operating for a better Future*

*Campaign advertisement for the 1999 elections.  
Courtesy of Fiji Times*

for creating employment and strengthening economic growth, and with its racially-oriented poverty alleviation programs. In the end, the trouble for the Coalition boiled down to this: the SVT could not loudly and in good conscience highlight its pro-Fijian policies, which had borne fruit in the past, for fear of alienating the supporters of its Coalition partner, while the NFP had to soften its public record of opposing the government.

Reddy kept saying that the two parties were not standing on the joint record on these issues; he acknowledged the failures and the criticisms of the past, but said they were standing on their promise to work together in the future. The choice people faced was clear, Reddy said. 'We can either go back to the failed and divisive politics of the past which pitted one community against another, fostered hostilities and suspicions in a political culture productive of ethnic chauvinism and exclusivism. Or we can embrace a new path and nurture a new culture of cooperation and conciliation.'<sup>15</sup> 'I have no qualms about going into this Coalition,' Reddy told a meeting at the Kshattriya Hall in Suva. 'This is imperative if we are serious about continued social harmony and solving the real problems facing the country.' He would never forget 1987, he said, 'but we must remember that we have a responsibility to our children. It is to the future we must look, not to past failings.'<sup>16</sup>

The NFP-SVT-GVP coalition was opposed by the Peoples Coalition comprising the Fiji Labour Party, the Fijian Association Party and the Party of National Unity. Each party had its own unique history and distinctive political agenda, but all three were united by one common aim, one overriding ambition: to remove Rabuka from power and, for Labour, to dethrone Jai Ram Reddy as the leader of the Indo-Fijian community. Labour's history has already been chronicled. PANU was a spectacularly misnamed western Viti Levu-based party, the brainchild of Apisai Tora, the quintessential chameleon of Fiji politics: founder of the Western Democratic Party which he had merged with Isikeli Nadalo's Fijian National Party to form the National Democratic Party, member of the NFP, Alliance, All National Congress, the Fijian Association Party, leader of the Taukei Movement. All



that said, Tora was consistent in one thing at least: his advocacy of the interests of western Fijians, who, he had long felt, had been rendered marginal in the larger Fijian scheme of things dominated by the eastern maritime Fijian establishment. PANU was his vehicle for representing western Fijians and redressing their grievances.

PANU had the blessing of prominent western Fijian chiefs, including Tui Vuda (and the Vice President) Ratu Josefa Iloilo, Tui Nawaka, Ratu Apisai Naevo, Tui Sabeto, Ratu Kaliova Mataitoga, Tui Vitogo, Ratu Josefa Sovasova, and Marama na Tui Ba, Adi Sainimili Cagilaba: an impressive list, but perhaps chiefs who lacked their past influence.<sup>17</sup> Tora initially broached a seat sharing arrangement with the SVT which would acknowledge his influence in the west. But SVT regarded Tora as a spent force, and was unwilling to cede seats in the west to PANU. Tora then approached Labour, which responded favourably. It was a coalition of convenience. Labour gave Tora a wider platform, which Tora no doubt hoped to enlarge for his own agenda. In return, Tora gave Labour the promise of western Fijian support and assistance in resolving the problem of expiring leases. The land issue was serious. On the eve of the elections, Ba chiefs, who command the largest province in Fiji, wanted 87 per cent of the leases not to be renewed (34, 634 out of 39, 725 ha); and in Sabeto, Nawaka, Nadi and Vuda; and the chiefs wanted 92 per cent of the leases not renewed (12, 728 out of 13, 704 ha). Tora held, or gave the appearance of holding, the trump card. The Fijian Association was the third member of the Peoples' Coalition, led since its founder Josefata Kamikamica's death in 1998 by Adi Kuini Bavadra Speed.

The Peoples' Coalition was a loose structure with a minimal set of understandings, which invited attack from the rival coalition. 'It is not a coalition, it is a cocktail,' mocked Reddy. 'It is a sham and yet another attempt to con the people of Fiji.'<sup>18</sup> Who would lead the Coalition if they won the elections, Reddy demanded. This was one issue the Peoples' Coalition had not yet resolved. Chaudhry himself had said before the elections that bearing in mind the political sensitivities in Fiji, a Fijian should lead the

country, and Dr Tupeni Baba was being presented at various rallies as the next Prime Minister of Fiji. 'I promise you that they will fight over the post of the Prime Minister if they win the general elections,' Reddy remarked.<sup>19</sup> That they did, with grave consequences for the party's internal unity and long term future. But Labour's public position was that the party with the largest number of seats would provide the Prime Minister. Would that leader be a Fijian? The answer was the same. That stance provoked this response: 'The Fiji Labour Party leader publicly said it is stupid to name a leader when the parties are fighting an election separately,' said Reddy. 'Indeed, how can political parties fighting an election separately call themselves a coalition?'<sup>20</sup>

The Peoples' Coalition similarly had flexible arrangement about the allocation of seats in the open constituencies. In some constituencies, they agreed to support a common candidate, while elsewhere it fielded parallel candidates. Where this happened, the Coalition partners were given their second preferences. This caused confusion, but voters were told to trust the party leaders and to leave the matter in their hands; they knew best. In some places, the strategy caused problems. PANU, for example, had expected, as a Coalition partner, to be allowed to field candidates in the western constituencies with substantial Fijian population: after all, it was an exclusively Fijian party, but Labour disagreed, and fielded its own, poaching some of Tora's prominent supporters and potential allies. Tora's own seat was contested by Labour whose candidate beat the PANU leader! Outmanoeuvred, Tora refused to attend any of the Coalition rallies. Towards the end of the campaign, he became a vocal critic of the Labour Party, chiding Labour president Jokapeci Koroi for not forgiving Rabuka and accusing Chaudhry of treachery.<sup>21</sup> Tora refused to give preference to his coalition partner, the Fijian Association Party, which had also fielded candidates against his own party in the west. Chaudhry had won this round, but it would turn out to be a pyrrhic victory. Tora would have the last laugh.

Another political party which was formed on the eve of the elections, which would raise Reddy's ire, was the Veitokani ni Lewenivanua

Vakaristo (VLV), or the Christian Democratic Alliance. Its support came from several different sources. First, there were those who opposed the 1997 Constitution. Rabuka and his party had 'failed the Fijian people miserably,' the VLV charged.<sup>22</sup> Rabuka had given away too much; he had 'exploited the indigenous Fijian institutions for his own glorification even to the extent of selling out on the rights and interests of Fijians.' Unless the 'core interests' of the Fijian people were addressed, there would be no political stability in the country. 'It will be fruitless and a waste of effort for all those who have been trying to build and make Fiji a better place for all to live in.' In essence, they wanted to restore those provisions of the 1990 Constitution which would have kept power in Fijian hands and so given substance to the notion of Fijian paramountcy. Other members and supporters of the VLV came from sections of the Methodist Church which wanted to turn Fiji into a Christian state.<sup>23</sup> The very public blessing given to the party by the President of the Methodist Church, Reverend Tomasi Kanailagi, and the presence within it of such fire-breathing figures such as Manasa Lasaro and Taniela Tabu, was powerfully symbolic. The re-introduction of the dreaded Sunday Ban was on the cards again.

The VLV also had the support of members of the chiefly establishment. To prove their chiefly connections, they made traditional approaches to Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara (Tui Nayau) and Adi Lady Lala Mara (Tui Dreketi), as well as Tui Vuda, Ratu Josefa Iloilo. Most people believed that Mara was quietly endorsing the VLV. Close members of his own immediate family were contesting the election on the VLV ticket, including his daughter, Adi Koila Mara Nailatikau, his son-in-law, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, and Poseci Bune who was expected to 'strengthen and consolidate the Mara/Ganilau dynasty.'<sup>24</sup> Fairly or unfairly, Mara was accused of harbouring dynastic ambitions. Many Fijians also remarked on his rather cool relations with Rabuka for a whole host of reasons. Rabuka's accusation that there were other 'instigators of the coup,' and that he was the fall guy who had refused to fall, was interpreted to mean Mara's complicity.<sup>25</sup> His comment, in Lau of all places, that the SVT's commoner candidate could be

more accessible to the electorate than a chiefly one, raised further questions about his loyalty to chiefs. Ratu Mara had never forgiven Rabuka for his dismissive comments about chiefs and their proper role in society, but about himself in particular: a towering banyan tree under which nothing grew, or would be allowed to grow.

The final VLV line-up included besides Bune, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, Koila Mara, nationalist, coup-supporting academic Asesela Ravuvu, trade unionist Salote Qalo and lawyers Kitone Vuataki and Naipote Vere. Reddy asked the voters to be wary of parties like the VLV, founded as they were, at least on paper, on principles of exclusion and intolerance. 'Will the Christian Democratic Alliance respect all the religions of this country?', he asked. 'Will they want to share political responsibility with the Indian people the way that Mr Rabuka and the SVT have?' He added: 'This is a time for reconciliation, moderation, and tolerance of all races, religions and cultures that grace this beautiful land of ours. This is not a time to support parties or coalitions which support religious intolerance.'<sup>26</sup> There was nothing unusual about the formation of the VLV itself. There were other parties with a similar agenda, variously aggrieved with the successful passage of the 1997 Constitution. The problem arose in the allocation of preferences. Although VLV was not formally a part of the Peoples Coalition, Labour courted its support and in all twenty two constituencies the VLV contested, it placed the party ahead of the NFP in the allocation of preferences: to a party that wanted Fiji declared a Christian State, the Sunday Ban re-introduced and the constitution changed. This was the politics of cynical opportunism at its best, or worst, clearly a breach of the spirit which underlined the Alternative Vote system. Labour operated on the principle of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend.' And in the bargain, Labour had tacitly gained the support of influential chiefs behind VLV as well.

The NFP itself had placed the VLV last in its preferences. Despite its competition with Labour, it had placed it ahead of the VLV 'as a matter of principle and morality.' 'This is politics devoid of any morality,' Reddy retorted. 'The way Labour is fighting the election is very dangerous to the

people and the country because they are stopping at nothing to get into power. This is power politics at its crudest.<sup>27</sup> How could Labour do this, he asked? 'I find it is quite disgusting that a social democratic party like Labour which says it stands for some basic human values is lending its support to a group of people who neither believe in democracy nor the legitimate freedoms of other people.' 'There has to be some morality in politics,' Reddy said. 'It is very well to say that Labour is to bring down the government and the coalition between SVT and NFP, but at what cost?'<sup>28</sup> Stewart Firth, then a professor at the University of the South Pacific, put the preference trading issue this way: 'Normally a political party which is committed to and believes in what it preaches would give its second or third preference to another party that shares its political views. The Fiji Labour Party and Christian Democratic Alliance are very different — from one extreme to another — when you consider their stand on the land, Constitution and Sunday Ban. So what are they telling their voters? Are they saying that if they can't get into parliament with what they are offering, the voters can have a party with totally different policies and ideologies? The way I see it, it is just about getting into power.'<sup>29</sup>

Labour's reaction to Reddy's tongue lashing was to counter attack. What about the SVT giving the Fijian Nationalists preference over Labour? Were they not members of the same coalition? NFP retorted that it was attacking Labour, not its Coalition partners, for its allocation of preferences. The fact was that NFP had little control over the preference allocation of its Coalition partner, but subtle points such as this got lost in the campaign. For Labour, NFP was its chief political enemy, and its destruction was their primary goal. Elections, moreover, were not about morality, but about winning seats, enough hopefully to form government. That was the end, the means did not matter. And no one believed that Mahendra Chaudhry, a devout Hindu (a devotee of Lord Hanuman, no less), would ever compromise his faith and agree to Fiji becoming a Christian state. People laughed off NFP's Devendra Pratap's claim that Hindus and Muslims would be converted to Christianity if Labour won

the elections, as well as Manjula Verma's advice for the Indo-Fijians to save up money to buy lamps and candles because all lights would go out with Labour's victory. Politics was all a numbers game, people said, and that for many was what elections were all about.<sup>30</sup>

VLV won two seats and formed a part of the Chaudhry government. The party was then quietly dissolved, its purpose having being served: putting Bune and Koila Mara into cabinet. All that talk about Christian State and Sunday Ban was just that: talk, nothing more. Bune eventually joined Labour and became a senior minister in the Peoples' Coalition government, but fell out of favour with Chaudhry and was expelled from the party in 2006 for questioning the leader's judgment and thereby — so it was said — undermining party solidarity. Not only Bune but anyone in the party who crossed swords with Chaudhry, including party General Secretary Krishna Datt and Vice President Tupeni Baba, soon found themselves on the outer, even expelled. Chaudhry would brook no criticism, no challenge to his authority.

#### ISSUES IN THE CAMPAIGN

For Jai Ram Reddy, the main issue in the campaign was the constitution and the need to give it time to realize its full potential. The need for people of different ethnic groups to work together for a better future for all was the constant theme he espoused throughout the campaign, almost to the exclusion of more mundane but electorally important issues, some of his colleagues thought. What Fiji needed most of all was political stability: 'Experience around the world shows that political stability is a precondition for economic and social progress,' he said. 'Without political stability we will not be able to achieve anything. Political stability will lead to enlightened and progressive policies which, in turn, will generate business confidence, investment, economic growth and, above all, job for our unemployed.'<sup>31</sup> Reddy emphasized his Coalition's pragmatic, problem-solving attitude through dialogue and negotiation. 'We all know what problems are,' Reddy argued: 'Unemployment, crime, the ALTA issues, scholarships for

our children, poverty, housing, water, roads, electricity, pollution, and the basic one, how to grow the economy.' It was very easy for political parties in election campaigns to promise to solve all the problems without telling voters how they would do it. 'But what the voters must think about is this: which political party and coalition will be best able to provide the country with workable solutions to the range of problems facing us? Not theoretical pie-in-the-sky ideas, but real practical solutions that can be achieved and sustained?'

Labour knew that the constitution was Reddy's and NFP's strong suit, and sought systematically and relentlessly to downgrade its importance as an issue in the campaign. For it, the constitution was an accomplished fact and therefore a non-issue. Labour's Krishna Datt told pocket meetings that Reddy's role in the review process and in the formulation of the constitution had been greatly exaggerated. The spade work had been done by the Reeves Commission and the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee on the Constitution, of which he, too, was part. Reddy was merely the figurehead of a large and diverse team. Datt was forgetting that he had to seek Reddy's intervention to break the impasse on the composition of parliament which his committee had been unable to resolve for eight months. In Lautoka, a Labour candidate reportedly dramatized the 'non-importance' of the constitution by holding the Peoples Coalition manifesto in one hand and the constitution in the other and asking 'Which of these two documents will put food on your table?' 'This,' he said, as he held up the manifesto and flung the constitution to the ground. This was not an isolated incident; it was a part of Labour's overall campaign strategy to cut the ground from under Reddy's feet.

Reddy pleaded with the Indo-Fijian voters to give Rabuka a second chance. The man had done the coup, he agreed, but he had also helped give the country a new and fairer constitution. Labour, in an opportunistic expression of outrage, vowed never to forgive the coup maker, and Sir Vijay Singh asked why Rabuka should be rewarded for rectifying a grievous mistake he had made in the first place? As he wrote, 'In restoring the

democratic constitution, Rabuka did the Indians no favour.' He had merely 'restored what he had stolen in the first place. He is deserving of some mitigation. If you were a criminal in court and you did some thing right, the court would deal with you lightly but it won't reward you.'<sup>32</sup> This was a harsh, unforgiving judgment on Rabuka and what he had been able to accomplish in the most difficult of circumstances, and in the face of opposition from within his own party. Sir Vijay forgot that Rabuka was not the sole instigator of the 1987 coups. Some of Sir Vijay's own former colleagues in the Alliance party, and now Rabuka's bitter opponents, had joined the colonel in 1987 to overthrow the 1970 Constitution. And, of course, Labour had lent him support to become prime minister in 1992. But these subtle points were lost. Reddy attacked Labour's strategy of constantly ridiculing and belittling Rabuka: 'It would be ludicrous for any Indian leader at this point in time to be involved in trying to unseat him because I believe that it is not only impractical but it will create more problems for the very people we say we are representing. The position is that we have taken the leadership as it is. It is not for we Indians to say who the Fijians should choose as their leader under the present constitution, no more than it is for the Fijians to say who the Indians should choose as their leader. The important thing is for the leadership of the respective communities to try and work together to resolve the major issues.'<sup>33</sup> The more Reddy appeared to 'defend' Rabuka, the more Labour attacked him, with increasing vitriol.

If Rabuka was one target for Labour, Reddy was another. Jokapeci Koroi described Reddy as a 'second fiddle player' for agreeing to let the SVT leader become Prime Minister, even in the unlikely event of the party winning more seats than the SVT. Reddy, like Rabuka, she said, 'cannot be trusted.'<sup>34</sup> She ridiculed Reddy's approach of moderation and reconciliation. Reading a fiery speech prepared for her, she had told Labour's annual conference at Khalsa College in Ba in June 1996 that the Indo-Fijian community must always 'agitate and demand its rights.' 'I do not believe that your rights which were taken away by the barrel of a gun will be returned to you by the signing of a document. In all countries, the aggrieved communities



have [had] to fight for their rights. Look at India and South Africa. Fiji is no exception,' she said, 'so forget about dialogue, consensus and cooperation on the issue of your rights. Your rights are not negotiable. To give in now would be to subject your children to another girmit.'<sup>35</sup> This theme was repeated throughout the campaign.

And all the old, tired tirades were dredged up again: Reddy running away from Fiji at the 'height of the crisis,' of 'selling out Indian interests.' I recall a Labour meeting in Meiguniah, Nadi, at which Chaudhry told his audience (the settlement had a sizeable Muslim community in it) that on this occasion he would not speak about the campaign but about Jai Ram Reddy who, he claimed, had 'stabbed Mr Koya in the back.' 'How could you trust a leader who could do this to his own people?' This was a blatant way of firming up Muslim support for Labour, which was for the most part in its camp anyway. Reddy's alleged treachery was a common theme throughout the campaign. If betrayal of his leader was one sin, another was Reddy's betrayal of the Indo-Fijian community. This he was alleged to have done most grievously by not supporting Siddiq Koya over ALTA (for reasons already covered before). Had he done so, Labour argued, Indo-Fijian tenants, whose leases were expiring, would not be facing the tragedy they were. Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act itself was branded as a 'noose around the neck' of the Indo-Fijian community, and for this Reddy was responsible! We have come across these accusations before, but what was interesting now was that the NFP was engaged in a constructive dialogue with the SVT government to find a solution to this perennially intractable problem which had bedevilled every Indo-Fijian leader since the 1960s when the ALTO leasing arrangement first came into existence.

Reddy defended ALTA as an entrenched piece of legislation. ALTA was to the tenant community what NLTA (Native Land Trust Act) was to the indigenous landowners, he argued. And, contradicting Chaudhry, he pointed out the benefits of ALTA. 'Far from selling them [Indo-Fijian tenants], we got them 30 years reprieve. We had the choice of either taking

30 years or allowing the uncertainty to continue. The landowners wanted their land back. It was a matter of making a judgment, apart from other improvements that were done to ALTA in favour of the tenants.<sup>36</sup> 'There can be no doubt whatsoever, that it has been this long-term security of tenure that has helped to underpin the soundness of the sugar industry in Fiji,' NFP's Discussion Paper on ALTA said. 'By the nature of sugar cane farming, the benefits of investments, whether in new plantings of cane or major capital improvements of drainage or purchase of cane transport trucks, are inevitably long-lasting.' Farmers, it said, 'have been able to borrow (and financial institutions to lend) with full confidence that their investments into their agricultural enterprises will return them appropriate benefits over the long-term, commensurate with their financial and labour sacrifices.'<sup>37</sup> Reddy was 'reaching out to those who own land, and influencing the government.' 'Influencing people,' Reddy said, 'who are in a position to make the critical decisions that will resolve ALTA. I can't see how thumping the table and making all kinds of threats through the media can resolve the land problem.'<sup>38</sup>

To resolve the land-lease impasse, the NFP proposed a number of measures, including providing market incentives to landowners to lease their land, government assistance with the payment of premium for lease renewals in cases of genuine hardship, full or partial compensation for exiting tenants, and assistance with the resettlement of displaced tenants. But perhaps the most novel aspect of the NFP proposal was for the government to act as a 'buffer landlord.' In this proposal, the government would act as a 'financial buffer' between the landlords and the tenants. It would lease land from Fijian landowning units at rentals lucrative enough for landlords to voluntarily lease their land rather than re-claim it. The government would then 'on-lease' the land to the tenants at rentals which would enable tenants, following best practice farming, to make an adequate living from the land. The difference between the rentals paid to the landowners and rentals from the tenants would be met by the government from the public coffers. It was an imaginative proposal with the potential to unlock the impasse, but

before the NFP could proceed with the proposal, the elections intervened. The point unknown to the public was that much thought was being given to a difficult problem behind the scenes in an effort to get the government on board the proposal.

Labour reminded the electorate of the SVT record in government and cleverly implicated the NFP in the mess as well, calling it the Rabuka-Reddy record. Truth and fairness were early casualties in the campaign. Mismanagement of public office, corruption at the top echelons of government, alarming crime rate, high levels of unemployment, enforced redundancies in public enterprises brought about the government's privatization and corporatization policies, the high cost of living in an economy deep in recession with two consecutive years of negative growth, the dreadful state of the public infrastructure: clogged up river systems prone to flooding, rundown roads and disrupted water supplies: all these were grist to Labour's campaign mill, and they made the most of it. This, Labour told the electorate, was the 'true' record of the SVT government. The electorate understood. The sight of redundant workers milling forlornly around the Nadi International Airport while the election was in progress, reinforced the image of the government as arrogant and uncaring. The NFP said little; for Labour the pictures of workers out of jobs, on the streets and all facing a bleak future, were a god-send. 'The NFP,' Labour president Jokapeci Koroï remarked, 'has been an ineffective opposition, frequently actively supporting the repressive measures of a government whose sole aim is to remain in power permanently.'<sup>39</sup> Koroï probably knew the truth, but all this was a part of linking Reddy to Rabuka and his government's policies; and the Indo-Fijian electorate believed her.

Labour's criticisms carried weight with a weary and worried electorate, but the party also promised new policies and initiatives of its own, which appealed to the poorer sections of the community living on the outer social and economic fringes of society. It would remove the ten per cent Value Added Tax and customs duty from basic food and educational items, review taxation on savings and raise allowances for dependants, provide social secu-

rity for the aged and the destitute, and lower income rates on housing loans. If elected to power, Labour promised to repeal legislation requiring farmers to pay back the \$27 million cash grant and crop rehabilitation loan made to the drought-stricken farmers in 1998; establish a Land Use Commission, in consultation with landowners and tenants, to identify and access vacant lands; and oppose privatization of strategic utilities such as water, electricity, telecommunications and civil aviation. 'We also believe that the overall control of the exploitation of natural resources such as forestry and fisheries must remain in State hands to maintain their sustainability. We will, therefore, reverse all moves to restructure and privatize them.'<sup>40</sup>

These words were music to the ears of Fiji's poor who believed Labour's rhetoric. But also interesting was the receptiveness of the message among the Indo-Fijian diasporic community, principally in Australia and New Zealand. Many had left Fiji after the coups of 1987 and had never forgiven Rabuka for carrying out the or Reddy now for working with him. There is a deep unforgiving streak in the Indian psyche which is difficult to explain but which is real. Grudges can be held for decades, even generations. Labour's strident anti-Rabuka rhetoric struck a chord with them. They contributed in various ways to Labour's cause but mostly through fund raising. NFP's former supporters overseas were, by contrast, more detached from the developments back home, less passionate about the cause of their former party. Labour was also able to tap into the resources of the Australian Labor Party, especially advice about the distribution of preferences.<sup>41</sup> The ironic thing about the 1999 general elections was that Labour, supposedly the poor peoples' party, was far better funded than the NFP which was mercilessly portrayed as the party of and for the rich.

The Indian communal seats saw a two-way contest between Labour and the NFP. Labour won 109, 284 of the 165, 886 Indian communal votes (65.9 per cent of the first preference votes) and the NFP 53, 071 votes (32 per cent), but no seats at all. Labour fared well in both rural as well as the urban constituencies, its electoral dominance evenly spread across the board. Among the Fijian parties contesting the elections, the SVT won 67, 214 or

39.5 per cent of the first preference Fijian communal votes, VLV surprisingly 21 per cent (35, 758), Fijian Association Party 32, 395 (19 per cent) and PANU 16, 353 (9.6 percent). The obvious question that arises is: why did Rabuka and Reddy, the two dominant political figures of the decade, fare so poorly, Reddy losing his seat and his party failing to win a single seat?

Rabuka's defeat was caused by several factors. His government's scandal-ridden performance was one of them. For many ordinary Fijians, life had not improved much since the coups. As Tamarisi Digitaki put it a year before the elections, 'at the grassroots level, the standards of living have remained largely unchanged from ten years ago. While his [Rabuka's] government's performance on the national and international fronts has been commendable, it is in the rural areas that the goods have failed to be delivered. Poor roads, water supply, communication services, education facilities and shipping services to the islands only give rural people more reason to vote the government out of office.'<sup>42</sup> Rabuka himself conceded that the complacency of his parliamentarians and a dormant party structure had cost him votes, saying that 'while party leaders were busy resolving national issues, no one was really looking into bread and butter issues affecting supporters.'<sup>43</sup> The same could accurately be said of Reddy.

Rabuka's pursuit of more moderate, conciliatory politics was always going to be fraught, facing the danger of being outflanked by extremist parties. The simple, inescapable truth is that political parties which court moderation in multi-ethnic societies tempt fate. Rabuka was accused of selling out Fijian interests, just as Reddy was accused of playing second fiddle to the Fijians. Rabuka faced other difficulties. He was not fully in command of the party he headed. The Fijian reserved seats were contested on provincial lines, where the selection of candidates was done in consultation with the leadership of the Provincial Councils. In some cases, candidates preferred or endorsed by the party were over-ruled by the provincial councils. Provincial concerns and interests took priority over party policies and national platforms. Back in the Fijian hinterland, Rabuka's role in the review and promulgation of the constitution was a distinct negative.

Not to be discounted as a serious factor in Rabuka's defeat was the desertion from his camp of people who had supported him before. They included the leaders of the Methodist Church, people like Manasa Lasaro and Viliame Gonelevu, who were angry with Rabuka for embracing a more moderate, multiracial stance. They were bent on punishing him. Now they had a party of their own, the VLV, which repudiated Rabuka's reforming policies and accused him of being a traitor to his own people. Compounding Rabuka's difficulties was the disdain and disapproval of leading chiefs who were 'uncomfortable with a commoner being in power,' and who believed that 'Fijian leadership should always remain with the chiefs.'<sup>44</sup> Ratu Mara's disparaging assessment of Rabuka was no secret, fuelled, it was said, by envy at Rabuka's success in getting the new constitution through parliament and his increasing national and international stature, as well as by personal dynastic ambitions. Rabuka's anti-chiefly remarks, while appreciated by many commoners, infuriated powerful chiefs, Ratu Mara among them. Recall that he had called Mara the huge banyan tree under which nothing grew, could grow or be allowed to grow.

#### REDDY'S EXIT: BADKA KNOWS BEST

Reddy's defeat is more complicated. Some suggested that the Indo-Fijian voters had taken revenge against Rabuka for the coups of 1987, and that Reddy's pre-election coalition with the SVT had cost them the election. There may be a grain of truth in this view. But it was Labour, not Reddy, who had elevated Sitiveni Rabuka to prime ministership in 1992, so punishing Reddy seven years later makes little sense. Similarly, the pre-election deal may have cost some votes, but an alternative course would probably not have made much difference either. In the public mind, Reddy was already linked to Rabuka through their close cooperation in the constitution review process. Campaigning alone might have made it easier for NFP but that would have gone against the grain of what Reddy had been working towards for the better part of a decade. Reddy was adamant that the decision the NFP had taken was the correct one. The Coalition, he said, 'was

based on some very fundamental principles. And you don't abandon your coalition partners because they have done something wrong or they may be suddenly becoming unpopular which is what people are saying we should have done.' He did not see it that way. 'I saw the SVT as the mainstream Fijian party. They were founded by the chiefs. They seem to have the support of the Fijian people. The important thing is that all these things we did with the utmost good faith because we believed in something. We believed that Indian and Fijian people and everybody else must be brought together in government.'<sup>45</sup> He had been honest about his intentions with the people. So, the Coalition decision was not a 'grievous error of principle as well as strategy' as Sir Vijay R Singh had argued.<sup>46</sup> On the contrary, it was a principled initiative with an overarching goal of national reconciliation.

Reddy faced the same problems as Rabuka did. His overwhelming focus on the two pressing national issues — the constitution and expiring land leases — led to the neglect of the party's electoral infrastructure. The once powerful Working Committees, pale shadows of what they had once been, were rusting in the rural areas. In contrast, the Labour machinery was well oiled and ready. The Fiji Public Service Association, of which Mahendra Chaudhry was the general secretary, covered the public service. The National Framers Union (NFU), of which Chaudhry again was the General Secretary, galvanized the farming community. No one believed Labour's claim that the NFU was separate from the Fiji Labour Party: in name, perhaps, but not in deed. And the Fiji Teachers Union, of which Pratap Chand, a Labour candidate, was the head, reached out to the teaching fraternity in the community. Primary school teachers in rural communities exercised, as they still do, enormous influence, and they were in the Labour camp. So, farmers, teachers and public servants were on Labour's side, or leaning in that direction. The NFP's structure was less focused. It had its Management Board, chaired ably by businessman and hotelier YP Reddy. It was effective in fund raising and making the higher party machinery more efficient and business-like, but the links to the grassroots remained un-rejuvenated.

'Mr Reddy is entitled to expect that a grateful electorate will reward him at the polls for his formidable achievements in restoring race relations,' Sir Vijay Singh wrote, 'and for bringing about a much acclaimed constitution.' 'Unfortunately, public memory is often short on that which one has delivered, long on expectations yet unrealized.'<sup>47</sup> After the elections, he wrote of the causes of NFP's defeat with biting sarcasm: 'The NFP's determined pilgrimage to the political mortuary began with its belief in its own invincibility.' The party had neglected its roots and the lessons of recent history which had seen Labour make significant gains into its traditional heartland. 'Indeed, the NFP leadership became increasingly estranged from its traditional constituency: farmers and their working sons and daughters. Any view that did not echo their own was most unwelcome and heightened their blood pressure. The leadership preferred the society of its own urban business and academic friends. It was a case of intellectual incest.'<sup>48</sup>

Not quite, but there was a kernel of truth in the claim. Much was left on Reddy's shoulders alone. Throughout the 1990s, Reddy talked about new directions and new thinking about a new future. His message would have been more appealing to the middle class and others with a long term views of things. But this segment of the Indo-Fijian community had declined substantially since the coups of 1987. Many of the best and the brightest had left or were leaving, and others were preparing to relocate. An important base of the National Federation Party had eroded substantially, while Labour's traditional base of workers, teachers and farmers had remained largely intact. Labour appealed to those who were desperate, direct victims of government policies: four hundred redundant employees of the Civil Aviation Authority, fifteen thousand garment factory workers and their families threatened with job losses, squatters and residents of low-cost Housing Authority flats, Telecom Fiji, Fiji Sugar Corporation and in the public service already reeling from a 20 per cent devaluation of the Fijian dollar. To these people, addressing the immediately pressing social and economic problems was more important than saving for the rainy day.



If NFP's loss in the urban areas was understandable, its loss in the cane belt, which had once been the stronghold of the National Federation Party and where it had been launched some thirty years ago, was puzzling. The influential role of the National Farmers Union has already been noted as well as the controversy about ALTA and the non-renewal of leases. Chaudhry had effectively placed himself as the leading champion of the farmers and Reddy as indifferent to their welfare. He seized upon the so-called 'Cash Grant' issue to galvanize the farmers to his side, and according to many seasoned party observers, this was one issue which hurt the NFP especially badly in the cane belt.<sup>49</sup> The cane growers had suffered badly as a result of drought the previous year, and the farmers, led by the National Farmers Union, demanded that the government pay cash grants to cane farmers who had lost their crop as a result of the natural calamity. They went on a strike to dramatize their cause.

The strike and the delayed harvest cost around \$17.5 million. It was an emotionally wrenching moment in the cane belt. Nonetheless, the tax payers could not be expected to bail out the drought-stricken farmers. As Reddy said, 'anyone with a modicum of intelligence should be able to see that cane farmers are not the only people who have suffered as a result of the drought.' In fact, the worst sufferers, he said, were the rural labourers, the mill workers and the subsistence farmers, all of whom depended on the sugar industry in way or another. No government, Reddy said, 'could indiscriminately give money (cash) to all the victims of a drought anywhere in the world.' So this call for government 'grant' was a gimmick from the beginning. The assistance to the tune of \$8 million would come from the Sugar Cane Growers Fund, and it wouldn't be in the form of a straight out grant but a *loan*, which the farmers would have to start paying off the following year (1998) at the rate of forty cents plus per tonne of cane harvested. This would be in addition to repaying other loans they got. Further, the assistance promised by the loan was really an illusion. The amount of loan the farmers would get at the rate of \$2 per tonne would not be sufficient anyway to indemnify them against the losses in

production. Meanwhile, they would have depleted the source of funds and would not be able to access it in the event of real need in the future.

There was another point to consider. A charge was being made on the Fund without the consent of the growers themselves, whose funds they were, overseen by their elected representatives on the Sugar Cane Growers Council. The consultative process was vital. For Reddy, the depletion of the Fund would be hugely tragic 'because anyone with the long term welfare of the farmers in mind must understand that this is the only capital that the cane farmers of Fiji have, and we have heard again and again about their indebtedness.' He continued: 'I think one can say quite candidly without in any way exaggerating the situation that other than their homes, clothes and imminently expiring leases, this is the only asset these cane farmers have.' And he was 'irked' at the way in which the Fund had been 'played around for purely political reasons.' Reddy warned the farmers about what was happening and what was at stake for them. 'Let me say this to the cane farmers of Fiji: If and when this money is distributed, you are getting no more and no less than what is yours anyway. That is it. That is what you are getting, but remember this: if there is a hurricane in December and all your houses get blown off; if there is another drought next year and the year after, and you have no where to run to, remember who to blame.' '[I]f these few hundred dollars are given out now or in the next month or two months, six months down the road, eight months down the road, these farmers would have nothing to fall back on.' 'I feel sorry for the growers,' Reddy said, 'they have become like chattels. They are treated like chattels; they are not treated like human beings.' He meant treated in this fashion by Mahendra Chaudhry and the Fiji Labour Party. 'They are treated like dice on a chessboard, to be moved, to be manoeuvred, to be used and discarded.'

The next day, the *Fiji Times* carried the headline: 'Reddy hits out at Cash Grant.' This was gross misreporting of what Reddy had actually said, the 'figment of the imagination' of the journalist who wrote the story, as Reddy put it. Even so, the experienced politician that Reddy was, he knew

## THE DÉNOUEMENT

### CASH GRANT CORRESPONDENCE

Hon Jai Ram Reddy  
Leader of the Opposition  
Parliament Office  
PO Box 2352  
Government Buildings, Suva  
18 June 1998

Hon Sitiveni Rabuka OBE (Mil) OstJ MSD  
The Prime Minister  
Minister with Special Responsibilities for the Constitution and  
Minister for Regional Development and Multi-Ethnic Affairs  
4<sup>th</sup> Floor, New Wing, Government Buildings  
SIVA

Dear Prime Minister

I spoke to Minister Filipe Bole this morning on the subject of Government assistance to farmers to rehabilitate their crops lost due to the drought.

I am genuinely concerned that in the current circumstances, particularly with the imminent expiry of ALTA leases, there are thousands of farmers out there who will not be able to provide the necessary collateral to borrow. Without capital they will not be able to rehabilitate their crops. That in turn will adversely affect the sugar production and the national economy. More tangible ways must be found to help these farmers rehabilitate their crop. I hope your Government has not closed the door on the subject of assistance to farmers to rehabilitate their crops. In this respect I point out that crop rehabilitation may be some way into the future when the rains come, and we are now in the middle of our normally dry season.

I would suggest that there be further dialogue on this matter between Government and all other interested parties in the sugar industry at an early date

Yours sincerely  
(Sgd) Jai Ram Reddy

REPLY

22 June 1998

Hon Jai Ram Reddy

Leader of the Opposition

Opposition Office, Parliament Complex

Veiuto SUVA

Dear Mr Reddy

On receipt of your letter of 18<sup>th</sup> June, 1998, I immediately asked the Minister for National Planning, Hon Senator Filipe Bole, to convene a meeting of the Ministers concerned to give further consideration to the assistance to be provided by Government to the Sugar Industry in the rehabilitation of the cane crop.

Senator Bole duly did that this morning. He convened a meeting of the relevant Ministers together with the Chairman of the Fiji Sugar Commission, the Chief Executive of the Sugar Cane Growers Council, and the Managing Director of the Fiji Sugar Corporation .

Following these discussions, the Sub-Committee of Ministers has made recommendations as summarised in the attached paper.

Before these recommendations are placed before Cabinet tomorrow afternoon, I thought I should refer them to you to see, and I would greatly value comments you may wish to make.

As you will see, the Government approach continues to be that the implementation of the cane crop rehabilitation scheme should be a joint undertaking between the Sugar Industry and Government.

The change now proposed is to make the necessary amendments to the law allowing the Cane Growers Fund to disburse the balance of the \$27 million in the Funds as grants rather than loan.

Likewise, Government support for the cane crop rehabilitation scheme will now be as a direct grant to the Fiji Sugar Corporation in the purchase of essential inputs, and no longer as an interest-free loan as Government had decided earlier.

You will see that the cash assistance to the cane farmers will come from the \$8 million which the Sugar Growers Fund has set aside to assist the farmers in need with their living expenses. This will also include assistance in meeting with their land lease rent obligations.

I very much hope that this package of assistance will cover in a satisfactory manner the assistance needed by the Sugar Industry as a whole.

Looking to the future, I hope we can agree that perhaps a portion of the proceeds from sugar export sales, and in particular the difference between sales at the market price and sales at the special Lome Sugar Protocol Price, can be used to augment the Growers Fund in financing future expenses, such as cane price support scheme and/or a crop insurance scheme.

Yours sincerely  
(Sgd) SL Rabuka

straight away the potential damage that the erroneous headline had done to his image. 'It is ammunition to my detractors,' he said, and hoped that the newspaper was 'not deliberately playing into the hands of these detractors.' *Fiji Times* reporting on political events in Fiji had unobtrusively taken an anti-Reddy and anti-NFP stance for sometime. In the campaign, the offending front page of the newspaper was laminated and presented as gospel truth, yet another example of Reddy's treachery. 'We are not saying this,' the speakers would say, 'this is what the *Fiji Times* is saying.' And, of course, the newspaper would never publish a lie. The issue was settled firmly in Chaudhry's favour in the public mind.

Reddy's great strength was also his weakness. No one, not even his opponents, doubted his integrity and sincerity of purpose. Privately, many Labour people greatly admired him as a leader and statesman. 'Right man, wrong party,' some said to me. But he could not emote with the public. There was certain aloofness to Reddy, which he recognized as just part of his nature. Chaudhry had an enviable 'grassroots touch,' sitting crossed-legged on

a rough sack-covered earthen floor, drinking kava and swapping stories and information with his supporters. He had his ears close to the ground. People respected and trusted Reddy; they respectfully called him 'Vakil Saheb,' (Honourable Lawyer Sir), but no one could ever imagine *him* sitting on the floor talking to the people. He was as reserved, even seemingly remote, as Chaudhry was gregarious and approachable. Hardly anyone in the party except its most senior officials called Reddy 'Jai' or 'Jai Ram,' while Chaudhry was often simply and endearingly 'Mahen.' Chaudhry understood the changing nature and mood of the electorate, to which he himself had contributed greatly. He was fondly referred to as 'Badka,' elder Cousin or Brother. Labour was portrayed as poor peoples' party, of farmers and labourers, while the NFP was portrayed as rich men's party. The name Labour itself had a certain almost mystical appeal to the poorer sections of the community, and Mahendra Chaudhry was their messiah. Labour chose candidates who were 'close' to the people, went to funerals and weddings and community functions, were 'one of them.' Their qualification to stand for parliament was for many a secondary consideration. Leave it to 'Badka': he knew best, people said. Getting into parliament was of paramount concern, in fact the only concern. 'It is a travesty of parliamentary system of government if we have people who come here and read speeches they have not compiled,' Reddy once said in parliament, reading speeches 'compiled by other people we do not see, we do not hear.'<sup>50</sup> It was a fine point that failed to register with the electorate. For his part, Reddy chose candidates who were highly qualified professional people who could be counted upon to contribute meaningfully to public debates and to the formulation of policy. 'Man-for-man' they were far better than Labour candidates in terms of experience, talent and education, but they lacked the one thing that now mattered most to the electorate: the grassroots touch, the willingness and ability of candidates to be an intimate part of their social world, to be there, with them, when they were needed.

In election campaigns, sometimes words which are not uttered publicly but whispered on the side can have subtle influence. Religion, culture, regional origins of people all come into play. Former NFP parliamentarian

Karam Ramrakha once told me about the Ka, Kh, Ga (the first three letters of the Hindi alphabet) of Fiji Indian politics, and how these were cynically exploited by politicians during elections. Ka=Katta (circumcised)=Muslim=Siddiq Koya; Kha=Khatta (Sour)=South Indians=Jai Ram Reddy; Ga=Gujarati=AD Patel. Translation: The Indo-Fijian community was predominantly North Indian, and yet all its major leaders in modern times had been ‘outsiders’: a Gujarati, a



*1999: The End of the Line.*

*Courtesy of Fiji Times*

Muslim and a South Indian. Wasn't it time to elect a North Indian, Mahendra Chaudhry, as the leader of the community? Blatant appeal was made to North Indian pride — and prejudice — though with what effect among urban Indo-Fijians it is difficult to tell. Many said that the NFP was not only rich peoples' party, it was also a South Indian party, pointing to its backing by some notable South Indians. Numbers don't bear out the claim, but the allegation stuck. I recall being told of a Labour candidate in Nadi (Shiu Sharan Sharma) who was a North Indian married to a South Indian. Among the North Indians, he passed himself off as a 'bhaiya' (brother) and among the South Indians as 'anna,' the Tamil word for brother. This sort of petty politics has long roots among Indo-Fijians. In the 1950s, for example, similar tactics were used against AD Patel: 'Apna Hai to Gair Kyun?' Why someone else when you have one of your own (a non-Gujarati candidate opposing him). What effect did this sort of insidious campaigning had

on the voters is difficult to gauge, but it could not have worked to Reddy's advantage. Even more damaging to the NFP was the claim by some dropped North Indian parliamentarians that the party was South Indian.<sup>51</sup>

Another of Reddy's problems was that he was also fighting against the tradition of Indo-Fijian politics (of which he had once been a part) which thrived on grievance and chest thumping us-versus-them agitation. In that scenario, any perception of closeness to and cooperation with leaders of other ethnic communities and political parties was always seen as a sign of weakness, of having 'sold out.' Siddiq Koya had paid the price for cooperating with Mara in the early 1970s, and Reddy was now being rebuked for working with Rabuka. Chaudhry was comfortably at home in the old grievance-laden agitational style of politics long characteristic of cane belt campaigning. Rabuka was bad and should never be forgiven; Reddy was bad and should be rejected outright; ALTA was a sell-out of the farming community, and Reddy was responsible for that; Reddy had accepted a reduction of Indian reserved seats in the constitution, capitulating to Fijian pressure; Reddy ('Run-Away-Reddy') had decamped to New Zealand at the 'height of the crisis' in 1987; Reddy had stabbed Siddiq Koya in the back; Reddy was a 'second fiddle player' for agreeing to the SVT providing the Prime Minister if they won the elections; Reddy had stood between the farmers and the cash grant that was surely their due; Reddy, in short, was for Chaudhry 'a disgrace on the Opposition benches,' a man 'whose prime concern is his own survival,' and who as the Leader of the Opposition 'was greasing up to government.'<sup>52</sup> Harsh, unforgiving words from a man who knew the truth about Reddy's true record, and who was able to persuade people to believe him. Badka was Badka, after all.

Reddy, by contrast, was not running a political campaign in the old accustomed style of Fiji politics, seeking narrow advantage for his political party. He was in fact running a campaign of education of a type rare in Fiji, raising broad nation-building issues he had talked about throughout the 1990s. He was, in truth, leading a fundamental political transformation, not a narrow political campaign. He was talking about ideas, about a new vision



for Fiji that transcended its past. He was asking people to lift their eyes to a new horizon, to look at the possibilities that could be nurtured by the new constitution. 'Our strategy is simple,' he had once said. 'It is based on sincerity of purpose and on the recognition of the fact that the only way to move forward is through dialogue and discussion, and to create an environment in the country where people are beginning to think again.' Noble sentiments but fatal in a do-or-die battle in which Labour was making a determined effort to appeal to the lowest common denominator in the electorate.

Reddy talked about the need for better understanding of the different cultures and traditions in Fiji. 'Is it not a shame that we do not speak each other's language? Why do we not speak each other's language after 100 years of existence on these islands? Has not our education system failed us miserably? Why have we not taught Indian children Fijian and Fijian children Hindi and let English be our common language.' 'We think we know our neighbour but we really do not, because we are not able to communicate with our neighbour in a language where you are able to convey to him your inner feelings, not just thoughts and logic but also your emotions, and those emotions are very important. We need to understand each other's emotions and then we may see the beginning of solutions.' He did not spare his own people who, he said, had not done enough to learn Fijian culture and traditions. He told them to be more sensitive to Fijian concerns and aspirations. 'There must come a time in the life of this nation,' Reddy said, 'when the many aspirations we talk about merge and become one. A mighty collective force, our collective aspiration, that will help propel this country into the 21st century, as a great nation, a shining example to the world, and to borrow that expression, *The Way the World Should Be*.' That, sadly, for him was not to be. He paid the ultimate price for demonstrating the capacity to appreciate, respect and accept that a different perspective can be as valid as one's own, for traversing the chasm between rhetoric and practice of Fijian politics. Reddy's experiment in multiracial co-operation was also an epiphany, possible when those of goodwill are prepared to make themselves vulnerable and trust one another.

## INTERLUDE

### REFLECTIONS ON A POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION SYDNEY, 10 APRIL, 1999

As I speak to you tonight, our country is turning yet another page in its history. We are in the midst of an election campaign which takes us farther along that course to reconciliation, rebuilding and unity mapped out in the 1999 Constitution. By mid-May, we will have a multi-racial, multi-party government founded on power sharing, consensus and equality, principles which underpin the new Constitution. I confidently expect that the coalition formed by the Soqosoqo Ni Vakavulewa Ni Taukei with the National Federation Party and United General Party, will have the numbers to form an administration and a cabinet. In accordance with a formal coalition agreement, the leader of the SVT is to become Prime Minister, and the leader of the National Federation Party Deputy Prime Minister. Some of our NFP members will be appointed as ministers.

For the first time, Ladies and Gentlemen, the elected representatives of the Indians of Fiji will play a full part in the governance of the nation. For the first time, the main Fijian, Indian and General Elector parties have joined together in a momentous union. It is another light of hope for the future.

I have come here to seek your support for what we are trying to achieve for our country. I know that although many of you have made a fresh start and created new lives for yourselves in Australia, your love for the islands of your birth is still strong. It is part of you. It is natural those memories of the Fiji islands are never far away and that you should think often of those friends and relatives you left behind. It is natural that you should want the best for your

homeland — even though you are separated from us by distance and personal circumstances.

And so I am here to tell you about what men and women of goodwill, of all races, have done to bring about the transfiguration of the Fiji islands. Many of you are known to me personally. You are my friends. And I am sure you will share with me that vision of what we want our country to become.

I ask you first to consider how far we have travelled in the last 12 years — from the grim days of the military take-over and the persecution, discrimination and repression that followed. I see here people who suffered at that time, people whose lives were torn apart, who saw the very foundations of their society in ruins.

But, you know, it is a long road that has no turning and we have witnessed what that means in recent years. For a time, after 1987, it appeared that the schisms that kept our population apart could not be bridged, that we were fated to remain in the darkness.

Then, gradually, perceptibly, a change began. We in the National Federation Party saw that there was a way ahead. The time for anger was past. The time for recrimination and blame was past. This meant we have to transform our political thinking, putting behind us the old, rigid ways of racial competition and confrontation. We concentrated on the realization that the people of Fiji needed each other; that we were all citizens of one country, with common concerns, needs and aspirations. We began a painstaking and deliberate mission of reaching out to the Fijian people, of reassuring them that we had no wish to dominate and take power exclusively for ourselves.

We went into the 1992 elections, under the former Constitution, with one objective — to create trust and goodwill and a spirit of co-operation. We were convinced that from this would come an

environment for change. From there we could go forward to a Constitution which recognized the rights and freedoms of all, which enshrined equality and fairness, which honoured the position of the indigenous community 'without relegating the Indians and the minority groups to a second-class status.

My friends, we discovered that the main Fijian leaders were willing to accept our hand of friendship. They too saw that a nation divided would never be all that it could become. The inherent goodness, kindness, and compassion of the Fijian people were manifested in the political dialogue that started in the early 1990s. Those of us from both sides who began that process opened our hearts and our minds to each other. We put our fears and insecurities on the table; we confronted them. And we found that it was possible to develop a common view of where we wanted the Fiji islands to go.

I now pay tribute to Sitiveni Rabuka, the man many of you, understandably, blamed for what happened in 1987. I too had reason to regard him as less than a friend. I tell you tonight that Sitiveni Rabuka has had the courage, the foresight and the conviction to do what many thought was impossible. He has risen to great heights as a leader by demonstrating unequivocally that he is committed to the unity and harmony of the Fiji Islands, that he wants to shape a society where we can all feel secure, where all races combine, in respect and equality, and pursue a common purpose — the welfare of our nation. He has done this at some cost — but he is not deterred. He will not be deflected from the course he knows is right. I have worked with him now for a number of years and can vouch for his sincerity in the search for the new Fiji.

From the start of our NFP policy of constructive engagement, Sitiveni Rabuka has been an influence for good. We began to detect tangible signs of the new mood not long after the 1992 elections. By 1993, I was able to tell a multi-racial gathering in Suva that I had

never known a period when so many people were so committed to the idea of national unity and identity.

There was further evidence of how we were managing to reduce racial differences when two months later I was invited to speak at the closing celebrations in Suva of the International Year of the World's Indigenous People. That emotional moment reflected on how remarkable it was that this celebration was closed by a non-indigenous citizen, that the organizers had seen fit to invite the grandson of an Indian indentured labourer to be chief guest. It was a reflection both of the tolerant and welcoming nature of the Fijians and of the Fiji we could build together.

As we proceeded with the intricate and delicate negotiations for transforming our country we inevitably encountered difficulties, deadlocks and opposing positions. But through quiet persistence, careful diplomacy and patience, consensus grew. Finally, through the efforts of the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee on the Constitution, we reached agreement on the appointment of a commission, to be headed by Sir Paul Reeves. It would gather the views of the population and make recommendations for a successor Constitution. Our nominee on that commission was Dr Brij Lal, who is with us tonight. I offer my heartfelt thanks to Dr Lal, Sir Paul and the other commissioner, Mr Tomasi Vakatora, for producing a unanimous report which laid down a blueprint for reconciliation and progress. Within the pages of that document were the ideas and recommendations which formed the basis for the making of the 1997 Constitution.

Ladies and gentlemen, that road I spoke of had yet another turning in June 1997. Through an initiative of the Prime Minister, I was honoured to speak to the Great Council of Chiefs. I confess it was a humbling and, yes, overwhelming experience. Never before had a Fiji Indian addressed that august body. We were breaking new

ground. It seemed that all the complex strands of our past came together on that day. Speaking on behalf of the Indians of Fiji, I told the chiefs that their forefathers had created unity from warfare. Now they were called upon to be a source of unity for the islands their illustrious ancestors had set upon the road to modern nationhood. I went further. I submitted that they were chiefs, not just of the Fijians, but of all the people of the Fiji islands.

I am sure you will bear with me, if I repeat two other extracts from that I speech because they capture much of what I tried to communicate:

*The Indians of Fiji, brought to these shores as labourers, did not come to conquer or colonize. We, their descendants, do not seek to usurp your ancient rights and responsibilities. We never have; we have no wish, no desire, to separate ourselves from you. Fiji is our home. Fiji is our only home. We have no other. We want no other. Our ancestors came to this land in search of a better life, in search of a future they dreamed of for their children and their children's children. Though they travelled to these islands long, long after your ancestors, surely the dreams and hopes of those who landed from the Leonidas were not that different from those who came ashore after the epic voyages from the west.*

The memory of that meeting of the Great Council of Chiefs will remain with me to my dying day. All of us present had kept an appointment with history. The distance between us was closing — and the future called.

You are all aware that the constitutional reforms we sought are now the supreme law of the land. They received the support of all sides of the House. What we negotiated is not just our Constitution. It came from the elected representatives of all the communities of the Fiji islands. It has been widely accepted by the population at large. We can all hold our heads high knowing that we have banned all

forms of discrimination, that the democratic freedoms and rights of the citizenry are fully protected and that the special place of the indigenous community is totally secure. We have an electoral system that is fairer than the one we had at independence, that encourages multi-racial co-operation and introduces voting for open seats where candidates from all our ethnic groups can seek the support of all the voters.

There is provision for a multi-party, multi-racial cabinet. I would suggest to you that we in the Fiji Islands have given an example to the world of what can be accomplished by harnessing the forces of goodwill and understanding in constructing a just society. Having said this, I must add that we have no illusions that the road before us will be easy. There will be hurdles and difficulties that we must resolve with the same concentrated purpose that has brought us this far.

Recently I attended a meeting in Paris where participants from 29 countries addressed topics relating to plural societies. Many enlightened initiatives came from that gathering with the sole purpose of promoting peace, tolerance and harmony in societies formed of differing ethnic and cultural groups. I was proud to be there knowing that we in the Fiji islands, in our own way and through our own efforts, had progressed with the task which many divided nations have found it so hard to accomplish. But I was reminded, too, that although we have avoided the kind of hell into which other countries have descended, we can take nothing for granted. Racism and extremism are always there, in every country. It is not hard to kindle the flames of latent bigotry and to place grievances in a destructively racial context. We must be ever vigilant in the Fiji islands in protecting our nascent culture of tolerance, respect and compromise. We still have leaders who prefer confrontational and

aggressive approach, who do not hesitate to ruthlessly manipulate communal feelings for their own ends.

The SVT, the NFP and the UGP choose the middle ground. It is there that we will find the policies for a truly multi-racial government, sensitive to the needs of each citizen.

The coalition is not something that was conjured up for an election. The seeds for our pact were sown several years ago as we co-operated with the Fijian leaders in resolving our constitutional problems. The 1997 Constitution calls on us to come together as a country. The coalition gives practical shape to that fundamental precept. It is the result of all that [that] the three community groups have been able to achieve through co-operative endeavour. We have a proven track record and a strong moral base. It is in my considered view the political grouping most likely to succeed for the Fiji islands. While our opponents are still struggling to decide how they will allocate the 25 open seats in parliament, we can point to an agreement on this that was reached in a matter of minutes. All the fundamentals are in place.

We can tell the people exactly what will happen when we win the election. They know who the Prime Minister will be and who is to hold the office of Deputy Prime Minister. They understand how the cabinet portfolios are to be shared and the basis on which an SVT–NFP–UGP government will manage the affairs of the state.

Let me touch briefly now on that vexed question of ALTA, the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act. The issue of expiring leases is not easy. But I assure you that we are making good progress and that a solution will be found. A year ago, the problem looked to be intractable.

But now, through application of the same co-operative spirit which marked our constitutional negotiations, we are beginning to see some results. There has been a great change in the attitude of the Native Land Trust Board, through the efforts of the Prime Minister,



other ministers and Fijian members on a Joint Parliamentary Select Committee. Consequently, 82 per cent of the leases that expired in 1997 are being, or will be, renewed. We have been told in the JPSC, by none other than the General Manager of the Native Land Trust Board, that most, if not all, of the remaining tenants, will be offered 50 year leases for their house sites.

We are doing everything humanly possible, Ladies and Gentlemen, to create an environment in which maximum goodwill prevails and the maximum number of leases are renewed. Meanwhile, plans are proceeding for resettlement, where this is necessary, and there is the possibility that those who are resettled will receive 75-year leases.

I ask you to consider what the outcome would have been if we had followed the course favoured by some — and that is to posture and to grandstand and provoke. The answer is clear.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have heard me referring to Fijians and Indians and General Electors. That is how it always has been. But want to add this: under the 1997 Constitution we now have a common name — Fiji Islander.

You have listened tonight to one of those islanders. Jai Ram Reddy is no longer an Indian from Fiji. He is a Fiji islander, born and bred. In the Koros and the settlements, the towns and the cities, the Fiji islanders are embarking on a historic journey of discovery.

We go forward as God's children, born equal, with the same rights and liberties and the same hopes for our country. It is this great truth that inspires us as we walk together towards that bright dawn of the third millennium and all the promise it holds. Thank you for listening, thank you for your continuing concern for the Fiji Islands and for your support.

NOTES

1. 'I am out of polls, Reddy,' *Fiji Times*, 4 June 2001.
2. *Daily Post*, 16 Sept. 1997
3. The document made available to me courtesy of Kamal Iyer.
4. For this I draw heavily on material at the NFP headquarters, Tamavua, courtesy of Kamal Iyer.
5. *Fiji Times*, 11 Sept. 1997
6. *Fiji Times*, 10 Sept. 1997.
7. *Review Magazine*, Jan. 1998, 23.
8. See Sir Vijay R Singh, 'No Other Way,' *Fiji Times*, 27 Apr. 1999.
9. *Daily Post*, 26 Mar. 1999
10. From a speech at the launch of the 'Constitution Awareness Campaign' at Parliament House, 29 July 1998.
11. *Fiji Times*, 8 Feb. 1999
12. *Fiji Times*, 14 Apr. 1999
13. *Fiji Times*, 22 Mar. 1999.
14. From a Ministry of Information Press release (undated) ca 1998.
15. *Fiji Times*, 22 Mar. 1999.
16. *Fiji Times*, 2 May 1999.
17. *Review* magazine, May 1998.
18. *Daily Post*, 18 Apr. 1999.
19. *Daily Post*, 18 Apr 1999.
20. *Daily Post*, 18 Apr. 1999.
21. *Fiji Times*, 7 May 1999.
22. All the quotes are from the party's campaign literature in my possession.
23. *Daily Post*, 31 Mar. 1999.
24. *Daily Post*, 29 Mar. 1999.
25. Comment made at Girmit Centre, Lautoka. See *Fiji Times*, 25 Apr. 1999.

26. *Fiji Times*, 26 Apr. 1999.
27. *Fiji Times*, 3 May 1999.
28. *Fiji Times*, 30 Apr. 1999.
29. *Fiji Times*, 27 Apr. 1999.
30. Based on my personal observation of the 1999 campaign.
31. From Reddy's final campaign address, 5 May 1999.
32. *Fijilive*, 19 May 1999
33. *Fiji Times*, 25 May 1996. Although spoken three years before the elections, they were repeated in the 1999 campaign almost word for word.
34. *Fijilive*, 28 Apr. 1999.
35. Address to the FLP Annual Conference, 1 June 1996.
36. *Review Magazine*, Apr. 1998, 17
37. I thank Kamal Iyer for making this document available to me. See also Biman Prasad, 'Resolving the Land Lease Problem in Fiji: A Way Forward,' *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 21:2 (2006), 177-193.
38. *Review Magazine*, Apr. 1998, 18.
39. *Daily Post*, 2 Apr. 1999.
40. Peoples' Coalition manifesto
41. As ALP strategist Dale Keeling told Bob Norton, the whole strategy was to maximally exploit the preferential voting system to turn ideological opponents into tactical friends. Personal communication.
42. *Review magazine*, Feb. 1998.
43. *Review magazine*, June 1999; also *Daily Post*, 21 May 1999.
44. *Review magazine*, June 1999.
45. *Review magazine*, June 1999.
46. *Fiji Times*, 18 May 1999.
47. *Fiji Times*, 16 Feb. 1999.
48. 'Election Triumph and Tragedy,' *Fiji Times*, 18 May 1999.

49. I draw on material preserved at the archives of the National Federation Party, and thank Kamal Iyer for access to it.
50. *Weekender*, 7 May 1994.
51. For this I am grateful to former NFP President Jagindar Singh.
52. *Review Magazine*, Apr. 1998.