

29. Ethno-Nationalism and the People's Charter¹

Jone Dakuvula

It has been suggested that it is difficult to promote a common national identity – a national moral vision, narrative, rituals and symbols – because:

... national identities come 'naturally' where people are defined by a discretely bordered territory, a stable and sovereign political state, a common language, a common culture and a common history. A national consciousness is easiest when ethnic or race is singular rather than plural (such as in a multiracial, multicultural and multireligious country such as Fiji).²

However, in the modern world, there is hardly any country that fits such a narrow classical definition. Almost every country today is multicultural and multireligious. Countries where liberal and republican or secular nationalism first emerged, such as the United Kingdom and France, have considerable diversity of peoples within their borders. The United Kingdom consists of four 'nations', England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The UK still struggles with constitutional reform to keep the Kingdom united, with Scottish nationalism in particular entailing a call for independence and to join the EU as a separate nation. France, the mother of republican nationalism, has to manage with Breton and Basque cultural nationalism. United States republican nationalism was inspired by the ideas of the French revolution of 1789, but the USA nevertheless became a melting pot model of liberal nationalism, even if that model is not relevant to the Fijian situation. The break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of its control over the former communist countries in Eastern Europe triggered recent attempts by nations that aspire to fit the narrow classical definition to create their own independent nation states. The consequences have been bloody, and the security and stability of some of these new nation states remains uncertain, as indicated by recent conflict between Russia and Georgia.

Fiji is not unique as a multicultural nation state wrestling with internal issues of ethno-nationalism. The 'People's Charter' is an attempt to build a stronger liberal and secular republican democratic framework in a multi-ethnic state that continues to be dominated by an ethno-Fijian nationalism. Fijian nationalists still feel insecure about their place in the nation state, despite the fact that ethnic Fijians are now an increasing majority of the population. The coups of 1987 and 2000 accentuated this insecure and inward-looking ethno-nationalism. Indigenous Fijian political leaders, especially since 2000, have pandered to the ideas of the

minority extremists, misrepresenting their own beliefs as representing the interests of the majority of indigenous Fijians. For example, the *Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua* (SDL) has been led over the last eight years by those whose hardline ethno-nationalist beliefs do not reflect the views and attitudes of the great majority of the indigenous Fijians that have supported the party.

The military perpetrators of the 2006 coup, through the National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF) and the draft People's Charter, are now compelling indigenous Fijians to reconsider their attitude of compliant support for extreme political nationalism. The latter are also being challenged to reconsider their concepts of identity and nationhood and to acknowledge the inter-dependence of our communities, the basis on which to found our national stability and security. The hardline pursuit of ethno-nationalist policies during the five years that the SDL and Conservative Alliance–Matanitu Vanua (CAMV) were in power sharpened conflicts within the indigenous Fijian community, with the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) in particular leading the opposition to the government. The result was instability and insecurity.

We now need to nurture new indigenous Fijian leaders who will distance themselves from extremist ethno-nationalism and build a moderate centre ground for governing coalitions that will respect and fairly include other ethnic groups. This means the election system has to be changed to a more democratic and simpler one that will better encourage a more enduring basis for voluntary interethnic cooperation as the basis of political stability, economic security and national development.

The prominence of extreme ethno-nationalism in this decade accelerated migration of many professional and skilled people – especially from the non-indigenous communities – and intensified internal migration of displaced farmers. This has contributed to poverty, low economic growth, low standards of achievement and shortage of skills in many areas. Fiji has been surpassed in the last three decades by less endowed countries that followed more effective economic, political and social strategies for development and nation building.

We need to resume and continue with the consensus-based nation-building project started by the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT) government when it introduced the 1997 constitution. That project was rejected by ethno-nationalists in 2000 and, on the heels of that rejection, the SDL/CAMV came to power and tried to use ethno-nationalism as the fundamental basis of 'nation-building'. This involved them promising a new ethno-nationalist constitution to be introduced after the 2001 election – although, in the event, court cases on non-compliance with the 1997 constitution threw the new government off track. Economic difficulties were also severe; over its five years in office, the SDL government achieved only about 1.7 per cent average annual growth in Gross Domestic Product. Politically, that experience has also been

very divisive. The SDL/CAMV project was not successful, and may have run its course since it was over-turned by the coup of 2006.

Andrew Heywood argues that:

Ethno-nationalism is based on loyalty towards a distinct population, cultural group or territorial area. It has racial and cultural overtones. Members of ethnic groups are seen – correctly or incorrectly – to have descended from common ancestors and the group is thus thought of as extended family groups united by blood.³

Jone Baledrokadroka's article on Fijian ethno-nationalism (Ch 27, this volume) illustrates this definition. I agree with Baledrokadroka's conclusion that 'liberal democracy' can co-exist with indigenous Fijian nationalism even though he has not spelled how this should be encouraged.

The draft People's Charter is an attempt to further reform our liberal/republican state so that the exclusivist tendency of indigenous ethno-nationalism is moderated and reoriented towards a broader concept of a multicultural, multi-ethnic nation state that stresses the civic principles of the nation as the regulator of political discourse and other interactions, thus contributing to the stability needed for overall national development.

Baledrokadroka argues that the promotion of a national moral vision, narratives, rituals and symbol is not problematic as these relate to the historical, cultural and religious diversity of the Fijian nation state. Furthermore, the People's Charter does not assume it can attenuate the primordial and ideological constructs of ethno-nationalism, nor that it can demythologize blood ties. It merely accepts the fact that nationalism in any form is a powerful and persistent ideology of belongingness that can evolve overtime. As Benedict Anderson pointed out, nations only constitute 'imagined communities'⁴ And imagined communities evolve as they create their histories. The draft People's Charter accepts the meaning of the identity of the '*i Taukei*', which is an exclusive indigenous identity that has existed for 100 years. Usage of the term 'Fijian' as a common identity for all the country's citizens, and as an all embracing national identity, may not be acceptable to some at this juncture in our history but it should become normal for the young and future generations.

If the British and the French have been able to manage and moderate their internal sub-nationalist communities within overarching legitimate constitutional states, based on secular principles, there is no reason why Fiji cannot also achieve this in the long term if we have innovative and courageous leadership now. Those advanced countries have been through centuries of bloody ethnic and religious conflicts to get to where they are now and they still have their problems. Fiji's history of ethnic conflict is very mild by comparison and our fairly tolerant and peaceful country has a more positive track record to build on. Indeed, it would

justify pride amongst those who feel deeply that they belong here whatever their ethnic background and origins.

It is encouraging that the political parties and political activists who had been ardent indigenous ethno-nationalists appear to be shifting slowly towards the concept of an integrated, cohesive, multicultural national state. I say this despite the heightened level of opposition from the leading spokesmen of some political parties to the draft People's Charter. While, in the last 18 months, the opposition to the interim government has not presented a coherent alternative for the way forward to the people of Fiji, there has at least been a concession that the draft People's Charter advances 'noble principles' they cannot disagree with. They only disagree with the fact that the draft People's Charter has been initiated by a regime they regard as illegal and illegitimate. They have yet to answer the realistic question: Where do we go from here? Boycotting the proposed President's Forum where constructive dialogue needs to take place may only lead to marginalization of the publicly uncompromising ethno-nationalists, because the nation-building project will continue to forge ahead.

There is a growing realization that assertive and dogmatic ethno-nationalism is counter-productive to the desire of its adherents for national development and political stability. The lesson of history of many countries is that people can build something better out of a crisis.

ENDNOTES

¹ An earlier version of this article was originally published in the *Fiji Daily Post*, 10 September 2008, and the article is republished here with the permission of the editors of that publication.

² *Fiji Daily Post*, 1 September 2008.

³ Heywood, A. 2007. *Political Ideologies: an introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

⁴ Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Verso, London.