

Reviews of Irian Jaya and Vanuatu are not included in this issue.

FIJI

Sociopolitical and economic consequences of the 1987 coups in Fiji were still unfolding by January 1998. The year began with a 20 percent devaluation of the Fiji dollar by Finance Minister James Ah Koy. Apart from the external negative impact of the economic turmoil in Southeast Asia, there have been major internal contributions to the downturn of Fiji's economy since the coups.

Politico-economic instability after the coups has been compounded by deliberate economic disasters such as the F\$220 million loss by the National Bank of Fiji due to bad debts. Furthermore, there is still uncertainty surrounding the renewal of leases under the Agriculture Landlords and Tenants Act and the relocation of tenants whose leases have not and will not be renewed. At the constitutional level, the effects of the reviewed 1990 constitution remain to be seen. There have also been uncertainties and insecurities regarding the move toward public sector reforms within the larger framework of structural adjustment.

Allegations emerged in early January 1998 that some members of Parliament attempted to suppress or tamper with evidence regarding Fiji's National Bank scandal. Corruption has also been a force to be reckoned with (*Times*, 1, 3 Jan 1998).

Given both internal and external factors, the devaluation of the Fiji

dollar was to be expected. Investment was sluggish, consumer spending was low, and there was moderate inflation. The Fiji dollar had also strengthened against those of its major trading partners, Australia and New Zealand (*Review*, Feb 1998, 2). A local economist argued, with reference to a popular international rugby event, that devaluation is a short-term solution to an economic crisis and that "even the 20 per cent devaluation is too low. Someone has to pay for things like the Hong Kong 7s holiday" (*Review*, Feb 1998), let alone the National Bank's F\$220 million in bad debts and the regular overseas trips of members of Parliament.

The governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji stated that the devaluation would, among other things, increase the competitiveness of Fiji's exports, make locally produced goods cheaper, encourage overseas investment in Fiji, increase demand for locally produced goods, and prop up employment and income (*Times*, 21 Jan 1998). Now, a year after the 20 percent devaluation of the Fiji dollar, most families are still struggling to make ends meet, and those most affected have been the economically disadvantaged groups such as low-income single mothers; low earners such as garment-factory workers, and subsistence and semi-subsistence rural dwellers. The *Review* explained that for some families, "trying to make ends meet on a F\$50 weekly income is like climbing Mount Everest" (Sept 1998, 21).

Various social problems have emerged or increased, perhaps as a direct result of the weak economy.

Crime has been on the rise, especially burglary, which has increased by 40 percent. Housebreaking increased by 13 percent. The *Fiji Times* reported that "the increasing incidence of burglary and break-ins may well be a function of the national economy, which remains sluggish in most sectors" (18 Feb, 18). By December, law-and-order problems were still increasing. Large supermarkets, service stations, business payrolls, and even banks have been victims (*Review*, Dec 1998). A common feature of robberies in Fiji since 1987 has been the wearing of balaclavas by armed men—possibly the only outstanding contribution of Rabuka's coups to the ordinary grassroots Fijian people.

Other forms of protest have emerged in 1998 to threaten the basis of both Fijian and *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT) leadership. Within Fijian society itself, landowners have blocked roads or demanded money for the use of their resources. Due to the promises of the coups to the indigenous Fijians, various *vanua* have demanded just compensation for the use of their resources. By October 1998, the government had partly yielded to the monetary demand of the Monasavu people for the use of their land, on which the Monasavu Hydroelectric plant is built. Conflict between the landowners and the Fiji Electricity Authority resulted in the deployment of the Fiji Police special task force to guard the premises for more than a month.

As a consequence of the increase in crime and other unforeseen forms of protest, the government allocated an

additional F\$5.8 million to the F\$36.4 million police budget for 1999 to cater for anticorruption efforts that, when studied carefully, mostly involve the upper and middle classes. An additional F\$450,000 annually was allocated for the operation of the Prisons Department for the next three years. However, despite this increase in budget, Finance Minister James Ah Koy declared that the problem of law and order is not going to be solved by money alone (*Review*, Dec 1998, 31). He fell short of explaining the other means of maintaining law and order.

If an improvement in the economy is directly linked to issues of law and order, then the future may not be very bright if one relies on the predictions of the country's economic gurus. While Fiji government economists predict an economic recovery within the next two to three years, Professor in Economics at the University of the South Pacific David Forsyth has argued that prediction is difficult in a small economy like Fiji's: "Government probably does not know what the policies are in detail. Progress is not monitored carefully and people do not know what is happening because it is not publicised" (*Review*, Sept 1998, 20).

Perhaps the economy is a direct reflection of the unstable political climate. This has become even more of a challenge to the ruling SVT government after new electoral boundaries were drawn up following the amendment of the 1990 constitution. While the constituencies have become larger, there has been a reduction in the number of communal seats, which have long been the political power base of the Fijian ruling elites.

On the other hand, open seats have been reintroduced and once again enable cross-voting among the ethnic groups, as was stipulated in the 1970 constitution. The allocation of seats for the different rolls are 17 Fijian communal (based on provincial demarcation); 6 Fijian urban; 19 Indian communal; 3 General communal; 1 Rotuman; and 25 open.

The House of Representatives consists of 71 members who are elected by voters registered in one of the four separate racially based electoral rolls (Fijian, Indian, Rotuman, and General [Other]). Voters from all of these communities will elect 25 members to the open seats, giving a "multiracial look" to Fiji's electoral system.

Drawing up electoral boundaries has not been an easy task for the Constituency Boundaries Commission, considering that there are four separate electoral rolls plus an open electoral roll. Thus the Fiji Islands have been demarcated five times to define the five major constituency boundaries—the Fijian Provincial Constituencies, the Indian Communal Constituencies, the General Communal Constituencies, the Fijian Urban Constituencies, and the Open Constituencies. Voters in Fiji will cast their votes twice: once for one of the ethnic categories, and once for the open category, where they can exercise free choice irrespective of the ethnicity of the candidate. Perhaps, for those running for election in May 1999, candidates for the open seats will have a tougher battle because they must really have multiethnic appeal to be voted into Parliament.

For the current members of Parliament, the redrawing of electoral

boundaries implies security for some and insecurity for others. In the province of Lau for instance, two of the current members in communal seats will become redundant, as the number of communal seats has been reduced from three to one. However, one of them might consider contesting the Lau-Taveuni-Rotuma open seat. With a boundary as open as this, where three provinces and more than three ethnic groups are involved, the "multi-ethnic appeal" of the candidate becomes a need. Furthermore, a candidate who is elected on an open ticket can claim wider representation than one who is elected on a communal ticket.

For large provincial communal constituencies such as Tailevu, which has now been divided into Tailevu South Communal and Tailevu North Communal, a number of things are implied. First, the dominance of one or two *vanua* within the old constituency will be put to the test, as each division may prefer to field its own local candidate. It is highly unlikely that a chief of Bau in the Tailevu South Constituency would want to contest the Tailevu North Communal seat, if there are eligible local candidates. In the long run, this division may alter the nature of patron-client politics, which have consolidated within Fijian society since the days of colonialism and the establishment of the Native (Fijian) Administration (now Fijian Affairs) and the Council of Chiefs.

Second, the division of such large provinces may enable voters to have better representation in Parliament. In the 1990 constitution, where the province of Tailevu for instance was just one communal district with three

candidates for Parliament, promises to voters were not well delivered because the three represented everyone in the province. With the new electoral boundaries voters will demand that promises be kept, as they know specifically who is representing them in Parliament. Perhaps, in the long run, this would imply that only the best would dare to contest elections.

A third possible effect of the change in electoral boundaries for the Fijian communal voters is that alignment with one particular party may be challenged. A good Fijian candidate who does not belong to the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* may still win a seat in Parliament. This can be attained through one of the many Fijian political parties, which include the Fijian Association Party (FAP), the Fijian Nationalist Party, the *Vanua Tako-Lavo* Party, the *Veitokani ni Lotu Vakarisito* (Christian Fellowship Party), and the Fiji Labour Party (FLP).

With the redrawing of electoral boundaries, new "marriage proposals" have been made across ethnic boundaries. The ruling *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei*, the National Federation Party (NFP), and the United General Voters have decided to tie the knot. However, three in a marriage may become too many after a while. This is a real marriage of convenience given that the first two parties represent both Fijian and Indian conservative interests. The saying "politics is the art of the possible" was validated when the National Federation Party fell in love with Sitiveni Rabuka's (SVT) party.

Another coalition has been formed between Sakeasi Butadroka's Fijian

Nationalist Party and the newly formed *Vanua Tako-Lavo* Party, both of which represent nationalist Fijian interests. The *Vanua Tako-Lavo* Party has a seat in Parliament that was won when Kavekini Navuso thrashed the candidate who was jointly fielded by the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* and the Fijian Association Party in the Naitasiri by-election in 1997. The Fijian Nationalist-*Vanua Tako-Lavo* Coalition has survived through its appeal to indigenous Fijian sentiments regarding the ownership of resources on native land. Navuso's victory in Naitasiri had a lot to do with his party's contribution in the dispute regarding compensation at Monasavu. With disputes regarding land and other resources increasing, the Fijian Nationalist-*Vanua Tako-Lavo* Coalition should not be dismissed easily.

The coalition between the Fiji Labour Party, the Fijian Association Party, and the Party of National Unity (PANU) is also a force to be reckoned with in the May 1999 general elections. The Fijian Association Party was a breakaway group of the SVT party. In August 1998 it suffered great loss with the passing of its leader, Josevata Kamikamica, who had the potential to become prime minister under this coalition. Adi Kuini Bavadra Speed (former widow of Dr Timoci Bavadra) took over the leadership of the Fijian Association Party, an appointment that caused major conflicts within the party and later led to the sacking of two of their four members of Parliament. One of the sacked members, Dr Fereti Dewa, dissented on two grounds, first that Adi Kuini had recently been very sick and

had undergone major operations in Australia, and second that one of the current FAP members of Parliament should have been elected as leader. These include Ratu Finau Mara (son of Fiji's president), Viliame Cavubati and Viliame Saulekaleka (both members from Lau Province), and Dr Fereti Dewa (member from Naitasiri). The conflict has not painted a very healthy image of the party.

The Party of National Unity was formed by the Ba Provincial Council. Ba is one of the four provinces in western Viti Levu and the second largest province in terms of area in Fiji. It boasts that within its boundaries are to be found major resources, including gold, sugar, forestry, tourism, various manufacturing industries, and Fiji's largest international airport. In the history of Fijian politics, opposition to eastern Fijian hegemony (which was reinforced by British colonialism), has always emerged from western Viti Levu. The formation of the Party of National Unity can also be seen as a protest against "internal colonialism" in Fijian society.

Eastern Fijian dominance began at cession in 1874 and is still going strong in 1999. The first western Fijian prime minister, Dr Timoci Bavadra, was overthrown by Rabuka's coups in 1987. The coups saw the return of eastern Fijian political dominance when Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara became president and coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka became prime minister in the new Republic of Fiji. Whereas the president has been reelected for another five-year term under the new constitution, the big question now in Fiji politics is which

coalition and which particular leader will be the nation's first prime minister in the new millennium.

Toward the end of 1998 a new Fijian political party, *Na Veitokani ni Lotu Vakarisito* (the Christian Fellowship Party) was formed by former Methodist Church President Manasa Lasaro. A number of high chiefs, who are members of both the Fiji Council of Chiefs and the Methodist Church, are supporters of this party. Most of the members were once supporters of the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei*. Rabuka's coups have brought about the reemergence of political independence among indigenous Fijians, which has led to the formation of new Fijian political parties—a healthy sign in the pursuit of democracy.

A closer look at the political lineup for the 1999 elections reveals that the likely Indian candidates have been in either the NFP or FLP camps during the last ten years. However, most of the likely Fijian candidates have had very colorful political histories, moving from the far right to the left and back to the center of the political spectrum, and surviving for lengthy periods. The political careers of some of these stalwarts have spanned decades.

Consider the case of veteran politician Apisai "Mohammed" Tora, current leader of the Party of National Unity and one-time Muslim convert. He began his political career in the 1960s after forming the very conservative National Democratic Party in western Viti Levu, made up mostly of indigenous Fijians. The party advocated "Fiji for the Fijians," the same song that Sakeasi Butadroka, leader

of the Fijian Nationalist Party, has been singing ever since. After some time the party merged with the Indian-dominated Federation Party, giving it the name National Federation Party. In 1977 Tora was a member of the National Federation Party when it won the general elections, but a "palace coup" spoilt their chance of governing Fiji.

In 1984 Tora crossed the floor and joined the Fijian-dominated Alliance Party and became a government minister as a result. In 1987, although he won his seat in Parliament, the Alliance Party lost the election to the Fiji Labour Party–National Federation Party Coalition. He then became actively involved in the destabilization moves prior to the 1987 coups. In the early 1990s Tora formed another new party, the All National Congress, which failed to win a seat in the general elections. Currently, as leader of the Party of National Unity, Tora will run in the general elections once again. This time around his party is involved in a coalition with the Fijian Association Party and the Fiji Labour Party, which he helped to topple through the 1987 military coups. Politics really make strange bedfellows.

A number of questions are worth considering. First, given the quality of some of Fiji's politicians, can the voters trust them to deliver on their campaign promises? Second, given the complexity of the "marriages of convenience" among the various parties, can there be political stability? Third, how can the kind of multiparty cabinet stipulated in the 1997 constitution survive in such a political climate, where even the ruling party's cabinet

lineup changes with the mood of the prime minister? Fourth, if there is no effective opposition, will there be a repeat of the National Bank of Fiji saga and other corruption and political cover-ups?

The next government of the Republic of Fiji has to take Fiji out of the economic doldrums that have contributed to the high crime rate and high emigration rates. By November 1998 a total of 339 indigenous Fijians had departed, compared with 300 in 1997 (*Post*, 15 Jan 1999). If indigenous Fijians are leaving Fiji for greener pastures, then something must have really gone wrong with the promises of the 1987 coups. Perhaps the new multiparty cabinet of 1999 will lessen the economic woes and forge greater tolerance among the many ethnic groups who call Fiji their home.

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NEW CALEDONIA

The year 1998 was expected to be more important for the political future of New Caledonia than the imminent turning of the millennium. The Matignon Accord of 1988, which brought peace to the troubled French Overseas Territory, promised a referendum on sovereignty after ten years.