Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 1992

FIJI

The year 1992 may well be remembered in Fiji as one of unexpected developments in the political arena, dominated by the general election in May. The first half of the year was consumed by the election campaign and the second half by its problematic reverberations. It ended with a promise to take Fiji away from the politics of racial division toward a multiracial government of national unity. Whether, and if, that occurs will be the challenge of 1993.

The general election, the sixth since independence in 1970 and the first since the coups of 1987, was preceded by a long and sometimes bitter campaign (see my article, this issue). Political fragmentation in the Fijian community accompanied the emergence of a number of political parties and the rise of provincialism. An intense and at times bitter struggle for the prime ministership was fought by Major General Sitiveni Rabuka and Josevata Kamikamica, a technocrat and finance minister in Ratu Mara's interim administration. Division also plagued the Indo-Fijian community as the coalition between the National Federation and Fiji Labour parties collapsed over differences concerning how best to repeal a constitution that effectively reduced it to a political underclass. Labour's strategy took supporters completely by surprise. Its leaders argued that Rabuka was a changed man who appeared to be a genuine friend of the poor of all races. They said he was an essentially decent man who had been used by some chiefs and other vested interests to execute the coup. Kamikamica, on the other hand, was the principal architect of economic policies that had eroded workers' rights and brought them much misery. Moreover, he was Mara's man, enough to disqualify him in their eyes.

Most important, Rabuka had given Labour leaders a written undertaking to act expeditiously on matters of concern to them. These included reviewing the racially based constitution, which discriminates against Indo-Fijians, urban Fijians, and western Fijians; revoking the anti-labour legislation passed by the interim administration; abolishing the 15 percent value added tax on most goods and services; and
discussing the extension of the expiring Agricultural Landlord and Tenants Ordinance under which Fijian land is leased by Indo-Fijian tenants. Rabuka backed his commitment with suitable rhetoric: “No longer am I promoting the aspirations we had in 1987; now it is for all races in Fiji” (WPR, 15 June 1992).

In retrospect, becoming prime minister was a relatively easy task for Rabuka; delivering on promises to various constituencies and running a smooth administration proved more problematic. The source of many of his problems was the way in which Rabuka had risen to the top. Although popular among many ordinary Fijians throughout the country (his power base), Rabuka’s support in the parliamentary group of the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei was suspect, as members hedged their bets or were otherwise divided in their loyalties.

To consolidate his support, Rabuka rewarded most of his close and especially wavering supporters with ministerial and subministerial portfolios, in the process creating the biggest ministerial government in Fiji’s history. Opposition leader Jai Ram Reddy called the expansion to twenty-five ministers “an exercise in political expediency by way of jobs for the boys” (TR, Dec 1992). One of the first bills introduced by the government called for an increase in salary for parliamentarians. The haste with which the bill was passed provoked much comment in the country. The politics of patronage worked, at least for the time being, but some in the Fijian camp, such as Senator Adi Finau Tabakucaucoro, a Mara loyalist, kept the anti-Rabuka flame alive, capitalizing on a series of embarrassing setbacks for the government. As the year ended, there was some speculation about Rabuka’s political future.

Rabuka moved early to deliver on his promises to the taukei, the indigenous Fijians, announcing measures designed to enhance their participation in education and the private sector. These included increasing the government scholarship fund for Fijians; establishing a small business agency to advise and train potential Fijian entrepreneurs; providing financial assistance to the provincial councils and the Council of Rotuma to buy more shares in Fijian Holdings Limited, and giving that investment agency priority in purchasing shares from privatized government commercial enterprises; and considering tax exemption for Fijian-owned businesses for up to twenty years. Labour denounced the measures as “just an extension of the haphazard Alliance manner of dealing with Fijian problems,” and as measures “intended for the rich and elite Fijians” (FT, 27 Aug 1992). Many Fijians, Nationalist leader Sakiasi Butadroka among them, also were skeptical of the benefits of the government’s proposals for ordinary Fijians. The National Federation Party predictably raised the issue of the needs and aspirations of poor Indo-Fijians, for whom the government’s policies showed scant sympathy.

In its first few weeks, the new government functioned more smoothly than many had predicted or desired. But it was soon embroiled in a series of embarrassing incidents that undermined its prestige. In August, the newly appointed minister of state for
Indian Affairs, Himmat Lodhia, was forced to resign after the police launched an investigation into his company for the disappearance from the customs bond of $67,000 of imported jewelry. A month before, Minister for Information Ilaiia Kuli was mired in a messy strike at Fiji Posts and Telecommunications over the sacking of the chief executive, Emori Naqova, and the ensuing conflict between the workers, who supported Naqova, and the management board. The strike was resolved only after the workers sabotaged fiber optics and compact cables, throwing Suva and international communications into chaos. And questions were raised about the $650,000 purchase price of the prime minister’s house when the government’s own valuer had estimated its value at $465,000. The house was owned by Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau’s family company, Qeleni Holdings (FT, 30 Sept 1992).

All these incidents paled into insignificance beside the so-called Stephens affair. Tony Stephens, a local businessman with previous encounters with the law, had been detained for forty days in 1988 on the charge of illegally importing pen pistols. He was eventually cleared, and retaliated by demanding $30 million compensation for wrongful arrest and detention. On 17 September, Attorney General Apitaia Seru settled out of court for $10 million. Stephens was to be paid $980,000 in cash, and have his mortgage with the Home Finance Company and the National Bank of Fiji paid off. The receiving order and bankruptcy action against him were to be discharged, and he was to be allowed to gain control of the Soqulu Plantation in Taveuni from the National Bank. Even more incredible, the deed of settlement was to be exempt from income, land sales, and value-added taxes (FT, 1 Oct 1992).

The settlement fell through when the National Bank refused to honor the deed signed by Seru. Soon afterward, the whole affair was exposed in parliament. Jai Ram Reddy called the deed an “attempt to swindle the government,” a case of gross corruption and incompetence, and pressed for a judicial inquiry. The attorney general, he said, had acted without proper parliamentary approval and in contravention of the convention which required that damages be paid after taking into account the state’s ability to pay.

Rabuka denied the charge of corruption but described Seru’s action as “a very sad case of error of judgement.” The government rejected the opposition’s call for a judicial inquiry with the power to make binding recommendations, but agreed to appoint a parliamentary commission of inquiry. Seru resigned and was replaced by Kelemeti Bulewa, whose law firm Seru subsequently joined. In December, the high court rejected Stephens’ application to have the deed declared valid. The matter is unlikely to rest there. Whatever follows, the Stephens affair has already tarnished the reputation of the government, leaving the vague suspicion that more people were involved than is presently known. As a Fiji Times editorial put it, “the sorry mess suggests powerful forces, answerable to no one but themselves, are at work to undermine constitutional authority” (FT, 1 Oct 1992).
The government fared slightly better on the international scene. In July, Rabuka attended his first South Pacific Forum meeting in Honiara. Although understandably apprehensive about his reception, he was warmly welcomed by regional colleagues. He proclaimed the Forum "a good outfit," and of his own role as a "new boy on the block" he said, "I come in and sit and listen and contribute when I have to. The best guide is if you have nothing to say, say nothing" (PIM, Aug–Sept 1992). However, he did assure the leaders that Fiji's regional stance was essentially the same as it had been under Mara, and he pledged Fiji's continued commitment to the security of regional institutions.

Rabuka made an equally successful state visit to Australia to open a trade and investment promotional campaign in Sydney (Lako Mai Fiji) and to restore full diplomatic and military ties with Australia. He found a willing counterpart in Paul Keating, who not only restored full relations but also dispatched Defence Minister Robert Ray to Fiji in October. The Australian public is now largely indifferent to the prospects for democracy in Fiji, but many Labour supporters there and in Fiji thought the Australian government's apparently unconditional restoration of full diplomatic and military ties with Fiji was premature. As an editorial in the Fiji-based magazine Islands Business Pacific stated, "The haste with which Australia wants to restore relations with the Fiji army, as if everything is back to normal again, is deplorable. Fiji is not back to normal" (IBP, Aug–Sept 1992). Rabuka repeated his theme of Fiji returning to normality at the United Nations' General Assembly in October.

Just when his stature seemed to be improving, Rabuka found himself in trouble again. In an interview with an Australian television channel in September, Rabuka remarked, apparently unaware of the rolling cameras, that his assurances to the Australian public about his commitment to restoring Fiji to democracy were a gimmick. "That was the television me," he said. "The real me" was a Fijian nationalist at heart. "We want a constitution that's totally Fijian-oriented." Asked if it would be better if the Indo-Fijian population was deported to India, he said "Yes," though he added—and this was edited out—that was not his government's intention. Further, he said that the Labour Party "didn't do their homework" on the issue of constitutional review. "We can't do it before the end of seven years," as stipulated in the constitution (CT, 1 Oct 1992). The interview caused an uproar in Fiji, leading the National Federation Party to stage a one-day boycott of parliament. Rabuka attempted to excuse his remarks by insisting that he was misquoted, but his explanation left most people unconvinced, reinforcing the impression of the prime minister as a man who could not be trusted to honor his commitments.

His remarks certainly dismayed leaders of the Labour Party, who had by this time become thoroughly disillusioned with Rabuka. When Labour made the deal with Rabuka, its leaders saw themselves as the real winners, the tail that would wag the dog. They were mistaken; once ensconced, Rabuka procrastinated. The value added tax
was introduced unchanged; the draconian labor laws remained on the books, though they were largely unenforced; little movement was evident on the matter of land leases; and there was delay on the issue of constitutional review. However, he balked when Labour threatened to reconsider its support for the government (FT, 2 Oct 1992), and talked of participating in a vote of no confidence in it.

In November, Rabuka announced preliminary steps toward reviewing the constitution. The review would be carried out by a bipartisan parliamentary constitutional commission made up of members of both houses (the House of Representatives and the Senate) as well as leaders of political parties outside it. The review would use "a consensus-building approach" with the 1990 constitution as the basic reference point, not the 1970 independence constitution, as the opposition parties wanted. Although the parliament will be closely associated with the review process, the views of the chiefs and the Fijian people generally will carry weight. As Rabuka said, "If we are to move forward with the review it is absolutely essential that the government should first secure the full support and understanding of the Fijian and Rotuman communities through the Bose Levu Vakaturaga [Great Council of Chiefs]" (FT, 21 Nov 1992). No time frame has been set for carrying out the review. It may well be completed within the seven-year period stipulated in the constitution, as Rabuka wants, but not earlier, as the opposition Indo-Fijian parties demand.

Early in December, Rabuka stunned the nation once again with a dramatic proposal for a government of national unity. "Be bloody bold and resolute," he said during the budget debate. "We have to do it now and that is a formal challenge and invitation to all political leaders on the other side." If the proposal was unacceptable, he said, he was prepared to step down (FT, 5 Dec 1992). He provided no details of how the power-sharing arrangement would work or how the proposal was viewed by his own party. In typical Rabuka fashion, his offer seems to have been made on the spur of the moment without much forethought. Nonetheless, the opposition parties welcomed the prime minister's gesture and promised to cooperate with him. At the same time many viewed his proposal skeptically. Why the offer now, when Rabuka had rejected the idea during the elections? Having Indo-Fijians in government, he had said then, would mean a loss of face for Fijians. What happened to his "Fiji for Fijians" rhetoric, and his oft-repeated pledge to realize the aims of the coups? asked the skeptics.

Some saw the government of national unity proposal as an exercise in political survival. With support in the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei suspect, his government mired in scandals, and the opposition parties demanding prompt fulfillment of promises to them, the proposal brought him much-needed breathing space, "something to grasp as his leadership sinks into uncertainty," according to Dr Tupeni Baba (FT, 5 Dec 1992). In this view there was no change of heart, just a change of tactics. That certainly was the hope of the Taukei Movement, or what was left of it,
which urged Rabuka to “completely reject and throw out of the window with precipitated [sic] haste the devilish concept of government of national unity” (FT, 22 Dec 1992). The Fijian National United Front supported the idea but on the condition that Fijian interests always remain paramount. Many members of Rabuka’s own party agreed that non-Fijian parties will be junior partners in any government of national unity.

How, or if, the idea of a government of national unity will work will be a major challenge for 1993. Another, tragically, will be coping with the consequences of devastating floods, the worst in nearly fifty years, which hit the country soon after Christmas, wrecking the economy and the infrastructure and causing damage estimated in the millions. The devastation came just as the economy was showing signs of recovery after years of poor performance.

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NEW CALEDONIA

Leaders of the Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste (FLNKS) had set 1992 as the date of the first assessment of the Matignon Accords. There were many meetings of the various pro-independence parties during the year, although final results will not be known until after the FLNKS convention in mid-January 1993, and the meeting of the Matignon Accords monitoring committee scheduled for late January or early February 1993.

The month of March represented a dark period for the territory. While the first two cyclones of the season, Betsy in January and Daman in February, had narrowly missed New Caledonia and caused only minor damage, Cyclone Esau hit squarely during the night of 4 March. It was followed less than a week later by Cyclone Fran. These storms caused considerable destruction, particularly in the North Province.

As residents reeled under the impact of Cyclone Fran, they learned of the death at age forty-six of Jacques Iékawé, the man in charge of the economic development of the territory. In 1991 he had been appointed secretary-general of the South Pacific Commission. The territory, metropolitan France, and the whole Pacific region were unanimous in their tributes.

The Prisunic-Barrau shopping center, one of the oldest established commercial centers in Noumea, was burned and looted on the night of 13 March following a violent outburst outside a local nightclub. This was perceived by most observers as a sign of growing dissatisfaction among a young