A review of Solomon Islands was not available for this issue.

**Fiji**
The first significant event of the year came in February when the country went to snap polls following the defeat of the budget in November 1993. The budget was defeated by 10 government backbenchers who joined 27 Indo-Fijian opposition members to vote against it. Sitiveni Rabuka’s opponents had hoped to use the election to oust him from office, but they miscalculated. Confounding critics and dissenters, Rabuka and his party, the *Sogo Sogo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT), returned to power with 32 of the 37 seats reserved for ethnic Fijians under the 1990 constitution, and formed a coalition government with the General Voters Party. On the Indo-Fijian side, the National Federation Party increased its parliamentary majority from 14 to 20, while the Fiji Labour Party won the remaining 7 allocated to the Indo-Fijian community (Lal 1994).

Fijian parties including the Fijian Christian National United Front, led by the fiery nationalist Sakiasi Butadroka, and the All Nationals Congress, led by Apisai Tora, failed to win any seats, while SVT’s chief rival, Josefa Kamikamica’s newly formed Fijian Association Party, with Ratu Finau Mara as one of its candidates, managed to win only five seats, three of them in Lau where President Ratu Mara is the paramount chief. Kamikamica, silently backed by Mara, lost his Tailevu seat to SVT’s candidate, Bau high chief Adi Samanunu Talakuli. Rabuka accused his Fijian detractors of disloyalty and treachery and asked his people for a second chance. They responded. The Indo-Fijian side of the electorate preferred Jai Ram Reddy’s moderate, conciliatory stance to Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhary’s more aggressive tone.

Back in office with a secure mandate, Rabuka promised the country a “stable, decisive, consistent and coherent” government (*PR*, 21 Mar 1994). To that end, he resurrected a previous, hastily conceived proposal to include the National Federation Party (NFP) in a coalition government. The suggestion came in typical Rabuka fashion, without consultation or prior discussion with anyone, including his parliamentary caucus. Neither his own party nor the NFP knew precisely what Rabuka had in mind. “The door will be kept open but it will require careful consultations on both sides and between ourselves,” he said (*FT*, 1 Mar 1994). Reddy was unimpressed. Calling Rabuka’s offer “highly speculative,” he cautioned, “The potential gulf between us and the Government on a future constitution of Fiji could be so enormous that it would be utterly unrealistic for the opposition to get locked into a government of national unity until such time that we are able to narrow down those differences” (*FT*, 4 Mar 1994). Nothing more was heard of the proposal.

Fulfilling his campaign promise to provide a lean and effective govern-
ment, Rabuka began by reducing the size of his cabinet from 25 (including 7 ministers of state) to 12. Dropped from the cabinet were Rabuka’s longtime ally from the Taukei Movement days, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, and the powerful Macuata politician Militoni Leweniqila, the prime minister’s uncle. Leweniqila was brought back into cabinet later in the year, along with Filipe Bole, the defeated SVT candidate for Lau, who was subsequently rewarded with a seat on the senate and from there inducted into the cabinet as minister for foreign affairs. Kubuabola became a thorn in Rabuka’s side.

Among other things, he revealed embarrassing details of the prime minister’s tryst with a Fijian journalist in an effort to force him to resign from office. Rabuka refused, and the parliamentary caucus of the SVT endorsed his decision after being told that the prime minister had confessed the incident to his wife and his pastor. Still, Rabuka’s personal reputation, as a moral leader and lay Methodist preacher, suffered a setback. Many also questioned his judgment about appointing the controversial millionaire businessman and close personal friend Jim Ah Koy, one of the two Fijian members from Kadavu, to the important Trade and Industry portfolio and empowering him with full responsibility for all government-owned companies, corporations, and statutory authorities. Ah Koy, many said, was the real power behind the Rabuka throne.

Among those dissatisfied with the cabinet reshuffles and the manner of Rabuka’s intervention in other ministers’ portfolios was the General Voters Party (GVP). Not only was their number in the cabinet reduced to one (later restored to two), but Rabuka also gave the impression of treating his GVP ministers with little respect. He first relieved Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation Harold Powell of responsibility for the national carrier Air Pacific, and then overruled Minister for Infrastructure and Public Works Leo Smith’s decision to sack for incompetence Ilaisa Senimoli, an ethnic Fijian, as director general of the Ports Authority of Fiji. These developments, which followed the GVP’s well-publicized policy differences with the SVT—the GVP opposed the Sunday ban, the Serious Fraud Bill, and (silently) the transfer of state land to the Native Land Trust Board—disenchanted many party supporters. “No one is taking the party seriously any more because of the way we are being treated,” said one party founder. “It’s becoming a joke” (TR, Dec 1994). How the GVP negotiates its relationship with its Fijian coalition partner will bear watching.

Rabuka’s relationship with the opposition NFP and FLP was equally turbulent. Early in the year, he hinted in parliament at the possibility of a third and possibly more violent coup if Indo-Fijians continued to oppose his political agenda, which led both parties to stage a two-day boycott of parliament. Then came cabinet’s decision to abolish Diwali and Prophet Mohammed’s birthdays as national holidays and to replace them with a single holiday—14 May, the date of both the first coup and the arrival of Indian indentured laborers in Fiji. The decision was rescinded only after widespread protest by Hindus, Muslims,
and Christians alike, creating skepticism in the general public about the government’s commitment to multiculturalism. Provoked by these actions, the NFP and FLP downplayed their differences and began cooperating on issues critical to their constituencies. On the Fijian side, too, Rabuka’s opponents began exploring the possibility of joining hands. A series of meetings took place between the Fijian Association Party and the All Nationals Congress, now headed by Adi Kuini Bavadra (TR, Oct 1994). Whatever the outcomes of these talks, the truth remains that the difference between Rabuka and his Fijian opponents is not one of substance, for they all agree on the principle of Fijian paramountcy, but one of degree. They all want Indo-Fijian participation in government; none of them wants full partnership.

Speculation that Rabuka’s opponents in parliament might once again use the budget debate to defeat the government proved unfounded as Finance Minister Berenado Vunibobo presented what he called a “mild and affordable budget” (SSD, 2 Dec 1994) with a net deficit estimated at US$43.6 million, or 2.5 percent of the gross domestic product. Expenditure was estimated at US$582.7 million, and revenue at US$487.8 million. Excise duty was increased on alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and all types of motor vehicles and motor fuel. The opposition questioned the government’s expenditure priorities, in particular the allocation of F$38 million to the Fiji Military Forces, which have had a consistent history of overspending. In 1993, for example, an unapproved F$9 million was granted to the army, and in September 1994, another F$9 million was appropriated from additional provisions for military emoluments and allowances (TR, Dec 1994).

In contrast, the police force was allocated only F$23.8 million for its recurrent expenditure. Police Commissioner Isikia Savua had asked for more than F$30 million to equip the force with more personnel, vehicles, and sophisticated communications systems to combat crime. He wanted the police to become more visible in the community. To boost morale, he also proposed better insurance cover for them (FT, 22 Dec 1994). The government’s reluctance to commit more resources to the police dismayed many, especially because there was a marked increase in crime during the year. By October, only 5,270 of the 16,257 crimes reported to police had been solved. Murder and attempted murder recorded the highest percentage increase, followed by rape or attempted rape, robbery with violence, drug-related crimes, serious assault, fraud offenses, theft and burglary, and house break-ins (FT, 8 Dec 1994). Perhaps even more disturbing than the increase in the number of crimes, is the occurrence of violent crimes in rural areas by urban youth, mainly young Fijian men. The government wants to strengthen rural Fijian cultural institutions to stem the flow of Fijian youth to urban areas. It has even talked of resurrecting the old Fijian court system to deal with Fijian criminals. Whether any of these initiatives will bear fruit remains to be seen, but crime, and all the problems associated with it, is
increasingly becoming a depressing feature of life in Fiji (TR, Nov 1994).

Rabuka received mixed reviews on the domestic front. On the external front, however, he fared slightly better. During the year, he made several state visits, the main aim being to normalize Fiji’s external relations and to improve trade. His visit to the People’s Republic of China late in September promised more economic cooperation and further improvements in trade, which increased from US$2.3 million in 1976 to US$225.25 million in 1993 (SSD, June 1994). China has already invested F$5.4 million in eleven enterprises in Fiji, and offered an interest-free loan of F$5 million (PR, 3 Oct 1994). While in Beijing, Rabuka asked the People’s Republic of China to establish a volunteer program, like the American Peace Corps, in Fiji. In June, Rabuka visited Australia to open Fiji’s Consulate-General in Sydney, designed to improve economic relations between the two countries. Australia’s annual export of goods and services to Fiji exceeds US$200 million, while Fiji’s exports to Australia are valued at US$86.6 million (SSD, 14 July 1994). Rabuka also raised concerns over the terms of SPARTECA (South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement), which, he said, were being used by Australia to place barriers on duty-free access to its markets for exports from island country members of the South Pacific Forum (PR, 11 July 1994). Farther afield, Japan, the third largest buyer of Fiji’s sugar, promised to increase its purchase to 100,000 tonnes, and the Malaysia Borneo Finance Group bought one of Fiji’s oldest trading houses, the Carpenter Group of Companies. Members of the Fiji Trade and Investment Board visited Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia to strengthen emerging Asia-Pacific trade and manufacturing links.

On his overseas trips, Rabuka assured his hosts that his government was committed to resolving the one issue that remains a stumbling block in Fiji’s relationship with the international community: the racially weighted 1990 constitution. Rabuka committed himself to a review of the constitution, but exactly how that was to be accomplished remained a matter of dispute and debate throughout the year. The terms for a constitutional commission were agreed between the government and the opposition in 1993 (Lal 1994). In August, a 20-member parliamentary select committee was appointed, consisting of 11 government and 9 opposition members. This committee was to determine the size and composition of the commission, receive its report, and facilitate its passage through parliament. After several confidential meetings, the committee agreed on a 12-member commission, comprising 6 ethnic Fijians, 5 Indo-Fijians and 1 General Voter, but further discussions stalled on the question of who would chair it.

The government was adamant that the chair should be a local, though in May it had agreed to an independent chair from overseas (DP, 10 Oct 1994). The person it had in mind was Chief Justice Sir Timoci Tuivaga. Why a local? asked Filipe Bole, the government’s spokesman on the review, “Why should I have someone from outside to tell me, to lead me into a constitution which is acceptable to
me?” (PR, 28 Nov 1994). The opposition, on the other hand, pressed for an outside jurist of international reputation. Bole accused them of lack of patriotism, saying the Indo-Fijians “would be more satisfied if things were spelled out for them by non-Fijians.” The Indo-Fijians, he asserted, did not have “the same emotional attachment to the country as the indigenous people.” Unable to move the government, the opposition threatened to boycott parliament and abandon the review process altogether. That was averted when in November the government reluctantly agreed to a three-member commission, to be made up of one Fijian, one Indo-Fijian, and an outside chair. Whether the government will abide by its undertaking to have an independent review of the constitution remains to be seen, for powerful sections of the Fijian community, including the Great Council of Chiefs, want no dilution of the power they enjoy under the present constitution. Filipe Bole himself conceded that the idea that Fiji’s political leadership should always remain in Fijian hands “is very deeply entrenched and will be very difficult to erase” (TR, Nov 1994).

Protection of Fijian interests, very broadly defined, will have to be the cornerstone of the revised constitution, recognizing the Fijian view that political leadership in “their country” is not passed on to others “through the accident of an introduced political system.” The Indo-Fijian leaders, whatever their other differences, are adamant that they will never accept a constitutional arrangement, like the present one, that will consign their community to political irrelevance. Amid all the problems, there is some room for optimism. The government is mindful of international pressure and has floated proposals for power sharing, even though these are vague at this stage. For example, a system of proportional representation has been mooted. A proper and broadly acceptable review of the constitution could pave the way for Fiji’s reentry to the British Commonwealth and reestablish the severed links with the British monarchy. The constitution will be at the top of Fiji’s political agenda in 1995.

Another issue likely to dominate public discussion is the renewal of agricultural leases, which begin to expire in 1997. Just how difficult the discussion could become was evident in the defeat of the FLP’s motion in parliament to form a joint select committee to begin talks on extending the expiring leases. Such an arrangement has been used from time to time to resolve issues that impinge on important national interests. But the government refused, saying it would only “play the role of facilitator and an interested administrator in the negotiations between the true players and ALTA [Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act],” the true players being the landlords and the tenants (DP, 16 Nov 1994). This hands-off approach will suit the Fijian landlords, who own virtually all the agricultural land in Fiji, and who expect to get premiums for renewals starting from F$15,000, something which, according to deputy leader Harish Sharma, is specifically excluded from ALTA. The Indo-Fijian tenants, vulnerable at the best of times, will face an uphill battle in negotiating renewals with the monolithic land-
owner representative, the Native Lands Trust Board. Meanwhile, Indo-Fijian tenants in parts of Viti Levu have already begun to enter into de facto share cropping arrangements with their Fijian landlords. Lease renewals could very likely become an explosive political issue. Fijian politicians, such as former Minister of Primary Industry Koresi Matatolu, have already linked renewals, on whatever terms, to Indo-Fijian acceptance of Fijian political dominance. In all, 1994 was a relatively quiet year for Fiji after the turbulence of the February snap elections. With the review of the constitution, negotiations for the renewal of expiring agricultural leases, and the law-and-order situation likely to dominate Fiji’s public agenda in 1995, 1994 may come in due course to be seen as the lull before the storm.

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References


NEW CALEDONIA

If the 1980s were a time of confrontations, when Kanak nationalists gained greater access to the political power structure, the 1990s seem to be a time of negotiations over the self-determination issue. Director of the Protestant Educational Alliance Billy Wapotro says that no one wants to return to the violence of the past and that Kanak nationalism must now employ “strategies to exorcise fear.” Even Jacques LaFleur, leader of the pro-French Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République (RPCR)—and a fellow Protestant—is capable, Wapotro believes, of a “cure of the soul.” In fact, LaFleur first proposed a “consensual solution” in 1991, to make the 1998 referendum on independence less of a “guillotine.” Sylvain Pabouty, of the Political Bureau of the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialist (FLNKS), calls its new task a “labor of ants”: day-to-day dialogue and mutual education that may not show up in the news headlines.

French Minister for Overseas Territories Dominique Perben reiterated his commitment to “Matignon II.” The Matignon Accord of 1988 brought peace and granted more local power and development money to the FLNKS-ruled Northern and Islands Provinces, while the RPCR still controls the more populous, multiethnic and industrial Southern Province. Perben vowed to infuse the postconfrontational phase of Matignon with more “elan” to achieve two goals: interethic consensus and socioeconomic progress. He announced a 2.28 percent increase in his ministry’s budget and