Fiji’s three coups have each occurred in two stanzas: first an illegal overthrow of the elected government, and then a later abrogation of the constitution. Unlike its predecessors, the 5 December 2006 coup took twenty-eight months to reach the second denouement. On 10 April 2009, the constitution was ditched, the judiciary sacked, and the scheduled date for elections was pushed back to 2014. The military was digging itself in for the long haul, in defiance of domestic and international protest. Domestic criticism was to be silenced by stiff media censorship, public emergency regulations, travel bans, corruption charges, clandestine firebombs, as well as cancellation of pensions. The inevitable storm of international protest after 10 April was less easily silenced. In response, military commander and interim Prime Minister Josaia Voreqe Frank Bainimarama claimed to be a victim of Australian and New Zealand “bullying” and appealed for solidarity from the Melanesian Spearhead Group states. Over 2009, as Bainimarama’s enemies faltered, he visibly grew in domestic self-confidence. On the international stage, he projected an image of a wronged and misunderstood champion of modernism in Fiji.

In January 2009, Bainimarama refused to attend a meeting of Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders in Port Moresby, insisting that severe flooding in Fiji required him to stay home to assist clean-up operations. The PIF meeting, attended instead by Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, settled on yet another ultimatum to Fiji’s interim government, insisting that a credible timetable for elections be drawn up by 1 May. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said “a line in the sand” had been drawn (Post Courier 2009). Bainimarama responded that he had no intention of complying with the ultimatum and said that the inevitable suspension should have been immediate (FijiLive, 29 Jan 2009). His nonattendance at the PIF summit generated some controversy within the ranks of the interim administration. Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ratu Isoa Gavidi and Fiji’s High Commissioner to PNG Ratu Isoa Tikoca were both sacked after urging Bainimarama to make an appearance in Port Moresby. Gavidi said later that Bainimarama’s familiarity with top-down military authority made it difficult for him to accept advice (Fiji Times, 3 March 2009). Over the course of 2009, other regime insiders urging a more conciliatory stance—including Permanent Secretary in the Prime Minister’s Office Parmesh Chand, as well as Robin Nair and former Citizen’s Constitutional Forum activist Jone Dakuvula—also found themselves demoted, sacked, or marginalized.

During late 2008, hopes for some resolution to the coup-related impasse had focused on the scheduled President’s Political Dialogue Forum, which the United Nations and the
Commonwealth had been invited to chair. But preliminary dialogue sessions with political parties—assisted by interlocutors Hawai‘i-based Tongan academic Sitiveni Halapua and Robin Nair, a Fiji Indian who formerly worked in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade—gave little cause for optimism. Through early 2009, meetings were regularly canceled or delayed, and Bainimarama made clear that he wanted to exclude Laisenia Qarase’s Soqosoqo Duavatani Lewenivanua (SDL) party and any others who refused to sign up to his government’s People’s Charter (for details, see Fraenkel 2009). Qarase’s SDL, together with the National Federation Party (NFP), and former Opposition leader Mick Beddoes, as well as trade unions and civil society organizations, met under the auspices of the Democracy Movement in January, but this too was soon silenced. In March, there were attacks on the homes and vehicles of prominent government critics, including Democracy Movement President Attar Singh, Fiji Times editor Netani Rika, and Colonel Sakiusa Raivoce, a former army officer who is also head of Global Risks Fiji, a recruitment organization for security personnel bound for Iraq. Qarase traveled to Australia in February, where he claimed his life was at risk in Fiji, but he nevertheless returned to face trial on corruption charges in March. The deposed prime minister spent much of 2009 away from Suva on his home island. In January, he was installed as the new chief of his Mavana village on Vanuabalavu. Reports of that event were carried back to Suva by the new Tui Kubuca’s traditional herald, Daily Post editor Mesake Koroi.

Far from embracing pressures for a restoration of democracy, the interim government was busily dismantling yet another tier of elected leadership. In January, Fiji’s town and municipal councils—the country’s only elected bodies for which all Fiji citizens vote together without race-based electoral rolls—were dissolved, and administrators were instead appointed to run the urban authorities. This was another blow for Fiji’s political elites, still reeling as a result of the dissolution of Parliament in 2006. The councils had been important bases for the SDL, NFP, and the Fiji Labour Party (FLP). For the FLP in particular, the shift in position over 2009 was dramatic. Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry had joined the interim cabinet as finance minister in January 2007, as well as taking responsibility for sugar, national planning, and public sector restructuring. His departure in August 2008 had been due to a rift with the cabinet and the Military Council, ostensibly over a bungled attempt to impose punitive duties on the bottled mineral water industry. The subsequent break with Bainimarama had not been complete, but it sharpened in early 2009. In February, Chaudhry criticized the interim prime minister for showing “an apparent lack of concern for the poor in our society,” and in response, Bainimarama accused the FLP leader of failing “to understand the dynamics of the world’s economy” (Fiji Times, 14 Feb 2009). Efforts to heal that breach, reportedly including an offer that Chaudhry rejoin the cabinet, proved unsuccessful (FijiLive, 26 Feb 2009).

Not only had FLP-run councils in Labasa, Lautoka, and Nasinu been
liquidated, but Nasinu Mayor Rajeshwar Kumar, a close ally of Chaudhry, was also being pursued by the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption for alleged misappropriation of funds. In addition, the FLP’s power base in the sugar industry was under threat. In February, the interim government dismantled the Sugar Commission of Fiji, Fiji Sugar Marketing Ltd, and the Sugar Research Institute, and was accused by Chaudhry of a “consequential marginalisation of the cane growers, as was the case in the colonial era” (FijiLive, 21 Feb 2009). In May, the government refused to continue to bail out the heavily subsidized South Pacific Fertilizers Ltd, a move also opposed by the FLP. Floods in January had destroyed the old Sigatoka Bridge, across which tramlines used to carry cane from Olosara Sector on the eastern side of the river to the mill at Lautoka in the west. In July, the nfp-aligned Fiji Cane Growers Association accused the government of abandoning the two hundred farmers in Olosara. Permanent Secretary for Sugar Parmesh Chand responded that spending F$7 million to repair the bridge did not make financial sense and urged farmers to “switch to non-cane from 2010” (FijiLive, 19 Sept 2009). (F$1.00 equals approximately US$ .52.) The thirty-eight-member Fiji Sugar Cane Grower’s Council was dissolved in August. It had previously been controlled by the FLP-aligned National Farmers’ Union, and the FLP responded by furiously attacking the Fiji Sugar Corporation’s “local/expatriate consultants from Australia” (FLP 2009), a reference to the growing influence of two returning industry old hands from the 1980s, Gautam Ramswarup and Rasheed Ali, both post-1987 coup émigrés. Sugar downsizing was not primarily an attack on the farmers’ unions or the FLP. It was an inevitable retrenchment given the ratcheting down of European Union (EU) preferential pricing. But the consequences were the same.

Chaudhry also had other reasons for concern about the changing political situation. In February, a Times-Tebbutt opinion poll found that 37 percent of Fiji Indians favored Bainimarama as prime minister in contrast to only 15 percent in favor of Chaudhry—a dramatic change from May 2006 when Chaudhry’s FLP had captured 81 percent of the Indian vote. Among indigenous Fijians, Qarase remained the favorite, with 52 percent, compared to 19 percent preferring Bainimarama (Fiji Times, 20 Feb 2009). Although opinion polls in Fiji are notoriously unreliable, the Times-Tebbutt poll entailed interviews with 11,256 people, an unusually large sample, and other than this, only anecdotal surveys of the public mood were available through 2009. Given the climate of intimidation and the usual urban bias in polling, the survey probably understated the backing for Qarase and the SDL at the time, but few doubted the findings about Fiji Indian support for Bainimarama’s government.

Nevertheless, this was a curious reaction from a community that had protested vigorously against the coups of 1987 and 2000. Fiji Indians, who for the most part lack the safety net of owning land in rural areas, had been hit hard by steep fuel and food price rises in 2008. Acceleration in
the decline of the sugar industry over 2007–2009 lowered living standards particularly in the cane belts of northern Vanua Levu and western Viti Levu, and strengthened the longer-run exodus toward the towns. Bitter hatred of the Qarase government had prompted initial sympathies for the December 2006 coup, but would this endure as the economy faltered, and as the prices of basic foodstuffs soared? Despite the economic deterioration, the signs were that Indian backing for the interim government remained strong. By year’s end, even the resolutely anti-coup NFP saw its Fiji Cane Growers Association making overtures to Bainimarama (FBC, 16 Feb 2010). Chaudhry had initially encouraged support for the regime on the part of Fiji Indians, and although he was now out of the government, other prominent Indians like Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum and Colonel Mohammed Aziz were in key positions in the new order. Bainimarama spoke regularly of racial equality, and his relentless assault on Qarase, as well as on the Methodist Church leaders and Fijian chiefs allied with the SDL, captured the sympathy of those who had long felt themselves to be the victims of Fijian ethnonationalism. As University of the South Pacific (USP) economist Wadan Narsey remarked in despair at the prevailing mood in his community, “To obtain the support of Indian people in this country (and abroad), all you need to do is chant the mantra of racial equality” (Fiji Times, 31 Jan 2009).

Bainimarama’s commitment to racial equality had come late in his career, although many retrospectively emphasized the importance of his schooling at the multiracial Marist Brothers School in Suva. His actions after the 2000 coup, and in particular his seizure of executive authority and abrogation of the constitution on 29 May 2000, had at the time been vigorously condemned by Fiji Indian commentators, including the FLP leadership. The platform of his thirty-seven-day administration in 2000 had been about uplifting the indigenous Fijians, not racial equality. His espousal of the cause of the Fiji Indians had matured during battles against the Qarase government, particularly over the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill, which many believed was aimed at granting amnesty to the 2000 coup instigators. Bainimarama nevertheless remained first and foremost a military man, in charge of an army that was 99 percent composed of ethnic Fijians. Little effort was made to alter this even after the 2006 coup, as could be seen from the overwhelmingly indigenous names of new recruits listed for training exercises as advertised in the national newspapers over 2007–2009. In substance, Bainimarama’s core message remained similar to that in 2000: It was about pulling Fijians up by the bootstraps into modernity, using repression if necessary. Allusions to a cannibalistic past and other derogatory references to Fijian backwardness were used to justify the case for military-guided modernization (see, eg, SkyNewsAustralia 2009; see also Fraenkel 2007, 435). The November 2000 mutiny, which involved an attempt on Bainimarama’s life, had encouraged a strain of fanaticism in the commander, and determination not to be swayed from his purpose was no doubt reinforced by the likely dire personal consequences of failure.
Not all of Bainimarama’s loyal lieutenants shared this perspective. In February at the Nasova Police Academy, Police Commissioner Esala Teleni criticized senior Fiji Indian officers for disloyalty after some protested to the media about internal religious pressures, including a requirement to attend prayer sessions as part of the commissioner’s “Christian Crusade” against crime. At a meeting secretly filmed by Fiji TV, Commodore Teleni berated the mostly Hindu and Muslim Indian officers saying “Kemudou tamata liu muri (You people are backstabbers). I don’t know what’s wrong with you people” (Fiji TV, 17 Feb 2009; FijiLive, 18 Feb 2009). Bainimarama came to the defense of his fellow naval officer, saying, “I would do the same thing,” and emphasizing the importance of discipline in the security forces: “Commissioner Teleni is not a racist, he is only doing his job” (FijiLive, 18 Feb 2009). In a letter to the Fiji Times, former Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi pointed out that this was vilification of members of a specific ethnic group and that “racism by another name does not make it less so” (Fiji Times, 25 Feb 2009). In March at Valelevu, Commodore Teleni, strutting on the stage in the manner of an evangelist preacher, reiterated his warning to disloyal officers and threatened divine retribution (Fiji TV, 21 March 2009). Police officers were required to attend Christian crusade events organized by Teleni’s brother Atu Vulaono’s New Methodist Church. Through mid-2009, Vulaono’s police force–funded New Methodists held frequent “Souls to Jesus” rallies across Suva, in Sukuna Park, at the FMF Dome, and at the National Stadium (Sydney Morning Herald, 29 Nov 2009), while the Qarase-aligned mainstream Methodist Church had meeting permits refused. The “Christian Crusade” within the police force, and Vulaono’s New Methodist road show, only abated after protests from prominent Catholic regime supporters led Bainimarama to quash the new cult.

The legality of rule by presidential decree, and thus of Bainimarama’s government, had been upheld by a decision of Fiji’s High Court in October 2008, but an appeal in the Qarase v Bainimarama case was inevitable. Judicial deliberation in this case was constrained by the precedent set after the 2000 coup, when the Court of Appeal ruled in the Chandrika Prasad case that the 1997 constitution was still intact and that the then postcoup interim government had no legal standing. To avoid that precedent, Chief Justice Anthony Gates, together with Justices Davendra Pathik and John Byrne, ruled in October 2008 that the postcoup actions of President Ratu Josefa Iloilo entailed a legal exercise of “prerogative powers,” which, although not explicit in the 1997 constitution, had been inherited by all former colonies from the British Crown (FJHC 2008). This was a verdict condemned by most legal scholars (see Williams and others 2008). The October 2008 judgment was nevertheless vigorously upheld as the basis of the legal order in Fiji. In January, postcoup appointee Justice Thomas Hickie—who quite literally sang the praises of the 2008 Fiji judgments on national television in November (Fiji TV, 25 Nov 2008)—convicted the Fiji Times of “contempt of court”
for publishing a letter critical of that judgment. Although no verdict was recorded against Fiji Times publisher Rex Gardner, he subsequently became the third Australian newspaper publisher to be deported since the 2006 coup.

In the Court of Appeal judgment issued on 9 April, the October 2008 decision was overturned. Justices Ian Lloyd, Randall Powell sc, and Francis Maxwell Douglas qc ruled that presidential powers were closely circumscribed by the 1997 constitution. The dismissal of Qarase’s government and the appointment of Bainimarama as prime minister were pronounced illegal. It was declared that a neutral prime minister should be appointed in a caretaker role to advise a constitutional dissolution of parliament ahead of fresh elections (FJCA 2009). With their judgment released and a government appeal for a stay order refused, Justices Lloyd, Powell, and Douglas left the country, enabling Gates and other Fiji resident judges to avoid the stain of having ruled the interim government illegal. Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum criticized the court for generating a “vacuum” (FijiLive, 9 April 2009). Bainimarama told Auckland-based Radio Tarana that he was going back to barracks (Fiji Times, 11 April 2009). This was, as Australian National University Professor Brij V Lal put it, a “cruel hoax” (Lal 2009), one scripted to reinforce the fallacy of presidential control.

The next day, President Iloilo—who was going back to barracks—announced that he was abrogating the 1997 constitution, that all judicial appointments had been revoked, and that he was declaring himself head of state. The Fiji Constitution Amendment Act 1997 Revocation Decree 2009 stated: “I hereby decree that all Decrees promulgated under my hand and seal shall be regarded as law and shall be observed and enforced.” Elections would not be held until September 2014, giving five years to put in place the necessary reforms “to hold true democratic and parliamentary elections.” Another day later, Bainimarama and his cabinet were all reappointed. Officers from the military-controlled Ministry of Information were sent on a nightly basis into the newsrooms of the local media organizations, several foreign journalists were expelled, and the signals from Radio Australia were jammed in an effort to avoid “negative publicity.” The Fiji dollar was devalued by 20 percent, and longstanding Reserve Bank Governor Savenaca Narube was sacked. So too was Director of Public Prosecutions Josaia Naigalevu and, as a result of regime infighting, Ombudsman Shaista Shameem. Bainimarama’s decision, at the initial press conference after the abrogation of the constitution, to appear alongside his fellow naval officers, Esala Teleni and Viliame Naupoto, rather than the top-ranking army officers, suggested some fear of resistance. Blog sites speculated about the absence of Colonel Pita Driti, the Fiji Land Force commander, and Ratu Tevita Ului lakeba, the head of the key Third Infantry Regiment (3Rfi) who is also the youngest son of former President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and politically well placed as chairman of the Lau Provincial Council.

Protest within Fiji was negligible, as it had been after the October
2008 High Court decision. A few courageous barristers turned up to demonstrate outside courts in Suva and Lautoka when they reopened after the Easter break, and Chaudhry condemned Bainimarama’s actions as “autocratic and dictatorial” (The Australian, 27 April 2009). Schisms within the military remained concealed or were healed by reward and self-interest. On 24 April, Colonel Pita Driti together with close Bainimarama confidante Colonel Mohammed Aziz were publicly rewarded with medals by President Iloilo. In June, Driti said that the Military Council was 100 percent behind Bainimarama and denied rumors of a split. Soon after the destruction of Fiji’s legal order, soldiers convicted for the killings of Nimilote Verebasaga and Sakiusa Rabaka were released on “compulsory supervision orders,” echoing the much-criticized actions of the Qarase government in its treatment of chiefs convicted for their part in the 2000 coup. Although those actions deeply damaged Bainimarama’s credibility, they also sent a clear message to the military rank and file that they would be protected should they shed blood to protect the regime. During 2009, military officers received substantial pay increases as well as additional back pay. By midyear, there were around sixty officers located in senior civil service positions, and all four divisional commissioners were military men. All this was a far cry from Bainimarama’s initial postcoup claims that no military officer would benefit from the December 2006 takeover.

Over 2008, the initial justification of the December 2006 coup as a “clean-up campaign” against corruption faded in prominence, partly due to the lack of success of the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption in securing prosecutions and partly because of serious allegations emerging against the interim government itself. In March 2009, Auditor General Eroni Vatuloka completed a report into the F$184,740 received by the commander in “back pay” for 698 days of leave allegedly not taken since 1978, and then promptly resigned. The Web site of his office remained stalled at the year 2006, the reports for which were shown as “produced but not yet tabled in parliament.” The pursuit of prominent individuals for corruption, including deposed Prime Minister Qarase and sacked Airports Fiji Chief Executive Sakiusa Tuisolia, was transparently linked to personal and political vendettas, while Fijian villages that acquiesced under the new order were rewarded with development projects.

During 2008, the emphasis had instead been on electoral reform, a perspective encouraged by the deliberations of the National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF). Early elections were unwise, it had been argued, because the 1997 constitution’s race-based electoral rolls were responsible for ethnic polarization in postindependence Fiji. Time was needed for Bainimarama to convince Fiji’s politicians to sign up to a new electoral system, a central focus of the political parties dialogue, and the scheduled President’s Political Dialogue Forum. This was a vision embraced by many of Bainimarama’s sympathizers, both within Fiji and even more so overseas. While it seemed at least plausible before the
April abrogation, it made no sense afterward, when nothing stopped immediate electoral reform by presidential decree. After 10 April, anyway, regime spokesman Neumi Leweni flatly rejected any resumption of dialogue. In July, Bainimarama told SBS Dateline that an election was out of the question because Qarase “would win it and where would that take us?” (SBS Dateline, 26 July 2009). Henceforth, electoral reform issues would be downplayed. The justification for the long delay until 2014 before elections was never publicly made explicit, but it became obvious that Bainimarama hoped that, with time, Fijian opinion would eventually swing in his favor.

On 1 July, Bainimarama released a “Strategic Policy Framework,” written by NCBBF Technical Director John Samy, who again traveled to Fiji from his New Zealand home. This outlined plans for consultations on a new constitution to commence only in 2012, and for the new legal framework to be in place by 2013, a year ahead of the intended election deadline. Although hostility to “ethnic based voting” was still mentioned, the emphasis was now firmly on the economy and “pro-growth and pro-poor” initiatives. This was music to the ears of Bainimarama’s left-wing supporters, who had long urged a focus on alleviating the plight of urban squatters and combating “neo-liberalism.” In January, the regime’s orientation had been different. Then, Bainimarama had postponed scheduled minimum wage increases across nine industries and rescinded a planned 10 percent decrease in bus fares (which was to reverse an earlier increase triggered by the global fuel price hikes of 2008).

The furious Wages Council chairman, Catholic priest Father Kevin Barr, accused the interim prime minister of caving in to business interests and gave a press conference from the labor ministry on national television provocatively accompanied by government critic, USP Professor Wadan Narsey. Bainimarama assured his critics that, although postponed, the minimum wage increases would occur in July. A few days later, with the Fiji TV cameras rolling, he walked together with Father Barr through Suva’s notorious Jittu estate squatter settlement to demonstrate government concern with issues of urban poverty.

In July, as promised, the interim government agreed to the minimum wage increases across nine industries. Other moves were also made to strengthen the link with the leftist development lobby. In March, the China Railway First Company signed a F$70 million contract to build low-cost housing units in Tacirua, Rawai, and Raiwaqa on the outskirts of Suva. This was intended as part of a F$260 million soft loan being sought from the Export-Import Bank of China at 2 percent interest per annum. Three hundred Chinese contractors were at work building a hydroelectric dam in remote Nadarivatu, and others were building a new bridge at Naqali to cross the flood-prone Waidina River in Naitasiri. In October, Barr’s Ecumenical Centre for Research Education and Advocacy produced a survey indicating that school attendance was falling because poor families could not afford bus fares. Bainimarama responded by abolishing the fares, generating vigorous applause from radical civil society activists (Sydney Morning Herald, 30...
But would this be only another temporary marriage of convenience, as had been that with the electoral reformists and the People’s Charter lobbyists? After all, the common denominator in these various favored alliances were that they all justified the interim government’s retention of political power and the delay of fresh elections while providing temporary jobs for a few hired scriptwriters.

With the politicians, chiefs, and public sector unions defeated, many indigenous Fijians looked to the Methodist Church for leadership in the struggle against Bainimarama. In June, Methodist Church President Ame Tugaue and General Secretary Tuikilakila Waqairatu met with Bainimarama and were told that the Methodist annual conference was to be canceled unless the veteran firebrand ethno-nationalist, the Reverend Manasa Lasaro, and the Reverend Tomasi Kanailagi were expelled (Fiji Sun, 9 June 2009). The conference, scheduled for August at Lomanikoro in Rewa, was to be hosted by deposed education minister and Rewa high chief Ro Teimumu Kepa. This was an obvious potential focal point for indigenous resistance: Military intelligence identified the risk entailed by allowing an event that even under normal circumstances would draw large numbers of indigenous Fijians together.

Public Emergency Regulations, which had been renewed monthly since the April crisis, were the “only way to control instability which may give rise to violent situations,” said Defence Minister Ratu Epeli Ganilau (FijiLive, 23 June 2009). In July, Ro Teimumu released an open letter on the Internet, saying that the annual Methodist conference would go ahead in defiance of the regime (Raw Fiji News, 21 July 2009). Government spokesman Neumi Leweni described this as a “form of incitement” (FijiLive, 22 July 2009). Ro Teimumu and eight Methodist leaders were taken into military custody and then charged with breaching the emergency regulations. Ro Teimumu’s daughter, together with Bau Chief Adi Litia Cakobau, placed a fireside video on YouTube denouncing the arrest (Cakobau 2009). Ro Teimumu and the churchmen were released on bail but kept under close scrutiny. Resistance soon petered out.

With the Methodists now also humbled, many in Fiji passively acquiesced under the new order, hoping for better times. Overseas, defiance remained easier. The émigré-run Fiji Democracy Movement organized demonstrations in Sydney and Canberra that were attended almost exclusively by indigenous Fijian families. At the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Cairns in August, Niue Prime Minister Toke Talagi shocked even Australian and New Zealand diplomats by calling on Fijians to “rise up to challenge the undemocratic rule of the military regime,” seeming to urge a violent confrontation: “If 500,000 Fijians take to the streets Frank Bainimarama can’t shoot them all” (The Australian, 6 Aug 2009). Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi had also called on Fijians to “wake up and reclaim your Government” earlier in 2009, leading Bainimarama to respond that such comments were “un-Pacific” (FijiLive, 26 Feb 2009).
Other Pacific leaders were more sympathetic to Fiji’s interim prime minister, including Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare and Vanuatu’s Edward Natapei, who offered to broker talks under the auspices of the Melanesian Spearhead Group. The small island states to Fiji’s north, including Tuvalu and Kiribati, were worried that repercussions of Forum defiance of Bainimarama’s government might lead to a severing of their air links, through Fiji, to the outside world. Lobbying by Canberra and Wellington ensured that the Pacific Islands Forum official statements remained resolutely in favor of the suspension of Fiji, but the position of the PIF Secretariat located in Suva was obviously threatened. Qarase and Chaudhry had been successfully prevailed upon to join forces in August to write a joint letter to the Cairns meeting rejecting the three-year delay before elections and condemning the Bainimarama regime for “setting itself up as the sole arbiter of what is good for Fiji” (Qarase and Chaudhry 2009).

Yet in truth, the anti-interim government politicians remained deeply divided, and even great adversity had not truly healed the schisms of bygone years.

The silencing of domestic criticism of Fiji’s interim regime over the second half of 2009 also spurred Bainimarama’s foreign sympathizers to become more vocal, now less afraid that their interpretations might be contested from within Fiji. The Vanuatu-based Institute of Public Policy called Bainimarama a “circuit breaker” to break “endemic racism,” rid Fiji of corruption, and destroy the pernicious influences of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) and the Methodist Church. The institute urged an international accommodation with “the reality” and criticized those “persistently demonising the Commodore” (Pacific Institute of Public Policy 2009). Such a generous interpretation took Bainimarama at his word and even exaggerated the commodore’s objectives. Bainimarama, wrongly described as “Catholic,” might have defied the leaders of the Methodist Church and the Great Council of Chiefs, but it was not clear whether he sought to destroy or to capture and reshape those institutions. Even if the case was fairly made for combating corruption and eliminating racial polarization, it was far-fetched to think that military dictatorship was the means for accomplishing these goals. Other overseas think tanks were also bewildered by Bainimarama but wanted to offer some way out of the impasse. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute’s Anthony Bergin absurdly recommended that Britain’s Prince Andrew, as a fellow white-suited naval officer, would be an ideal mediator to engage in discussions with Bainimarama (The Australian, 8 May 2009).

Before the United Nations General Assembly in September, Bainimarama condemned the “old elites,” whom he blamed for generating earlier coups and impeding reform. He did not mention that prominent backers of the 1987 coup, including Ratu Inoke Kubuabola and Filipe Bole, were in his own cabinet. His assault on the “old elites” had been selective and pragmatic: powerful ministerial portfolios were also held by prominent eastern chiefs, such as Ratu Epeli Ganilau and Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, both sons-in-
law of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, Fiji’s former president and 1970–1987 prime minister. The attack on the chiefs had been aimed at destroying the influence of the paramount chiefs who were firm allies of Qarase, particularly Roko Tui Dreketi Ro Teimumu Kepa (Rewa-Burebasaga) and Ratu Naqama Lalabalavu (Cakaudrove), but Bainimarama nevertheless remained close to allied chiefs—for example, in his home village of Kiuva and in the old Matanitu (kingdom) of Verata. His own behavior and demeanor, as well as his treatment during military kava ceremonies, was increasingly vakaturaga (in the manner of high chiefs).

Had the Great Council of Chiefs truly been abolished, or would it ultimately be reconstituted? In August, Bainimarama was adamant that “there is no Great Council of Chiefs,” but he was noncommittal about whether such a body might later be resurrected (FijiLive, 11 Aug 2009). According to the 2008 GCC decree, a new look fifty-two-member council had been envisaged comprising only apolitical chiefs who had been “traditionally installed,” suggesting a more puritanical definition of “chief” than existing practice (under which many titles remain vacant and many chiefs uninstalled). Bainimarama had also backtracked on proposals to downgrade the Ministry of Fijian Affairs to a department in 2007. Over 2007–2008, he had been angered by the GCC refusal to endorse Ratu Epeli Nailatikau as vice president—or effectively president in waiting, given the age and infirmity of eighty-nine-year-old Ratu Josefa Iloilo. Nailatikau had himself taken control of that ministry in October 2008, now combined under the rubric of the Ministry of Provincial Development, Indigenous and Multi-Ethnic Affairs. In late 2008, he had convened an initial meeting of the Bose ni Turaga (council of lower-level chiefs), with the objective of a bottom-upward capturing of the authority of the Great Council of Chiefs. While under the 1997 constitution this had been an important maneuver: the Great Council of Chiefs was constitutionally the appointing authority for the president and vice president. In the wake of the abrogation of the constitution, that route was no longer necessary, and no effort was made to reconvene the Bose ni Turaga in 2009. A week after the constitution’s abrogation, Ratu Epeli became vice president by decree. Ratu Josefa Iloilo was retired on 30 July, paving the way for Nailatikau to assume the top job. The delay before that appointment, which only occurred three months later on 5 November, suggested some nervousness on the part of Bainimarama about handing over executive authority. In the intervening period, there were rumors that Bainimarama was toying with taking the presidency for himself.

If the propaganda was to be believed, then, the elegant new F$30 million Vale ni Bose Levu Vakaturaga complex situated next to Government House on the Suva foreshore was a huge white elephant. The project, undertaken by Raghwan Construction Ltd, had started under Qarase, but what purpose was it now to serve? Military spokesman Neumi Leweni said that the new building would be officially titled “Vale ni Bose” (“House of Meetings”) without the
reference to “Vakaturaga” (“Great Chiefs”). A hundred guests were invited to attend the grand September opening ceremony and watch President Iloilo perform his last official duty. Representing the government were Ratu Epeli Ganilau, as acting prime minister, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, Filipe Bole, and Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. The ceremony was boycotted by most of the Qarase-aligned chiefs, but chiefs from Macuata, Sabeto, Bua, and Ba were present, as was the Rewa Vunivalu Ro Epeli Mataitini, and, rather oddly, Naitasiri chief Ratu Inoke Takiveikata, who was soon to be imprisoned for alleged involvement in a 2007 plot to assassinate Bainimarama (FijiLive, 26 Sept 2009). The interim prime minister also did not attend the October launch by PNG Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare of Deryck Scarr’s biography Tuimacilai: A Life of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, although the daughters of Ratu Mara and his sons-in-law Ratu Epeli Nailatikau and Ganilau were present, as was Mara’s son 3RFI Commander Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba. Ambivalence toward the incorporated element of the chiefly order was obvious, but there was also no sign of eagerness to cut the eastern chiefs adrift.

The economy fared poorly over 2009. Unlike the coups of 1987 and 2000, which resulted in sharp downturns followed by rapid recoveries, the 2006 coup generated a double-dip recession. The economy contracted by 6.6 percent in 2007, remained just about flat (0.2 percent) in 2008, and fell again by 2.5 percent in 2009. Long protected under the European Union Lomé and then Cotonou arrangements, preferential prices for Fiji sugar were being gradually reduced to enable EU compliance with World Trading Organization rules. On 1 October, the EU price for Fiji sugar was cut by a further 22 percent, bringing to 36 percent the total fall since 2006. That would have happened even without the coup, but scheduled EU grant assistance for adjustment to the new pricing regime was canceled as a result of the illegal overthrow of Qarase’s government and the lack of agreement on a road map to elections. The Fiji Sugar Corporation produced 167,611 metric tonnes of sugar in 2009, well below the 250,000–300,000 tonnes scheduled to be delivered to Tate & Lyle annually. Exports fell for the third successive year and stood at about half the average level a decade previously. The Fiji Sugar Corporation annual report for 2009 declared an after tax loss of $36.8 million in the year ending 31 May. The company was unable to make repayments on a $86 million loan from exim Bank of India for purchasing materials for mill restructuring. Just prior to the last shipment preceding the 1 October price fall, both of the main Indian farmers’ unions reported military harassment of cane-cutters for burning cane, the latter being a widespread practice that eases cutting but lowers sugar output.

Like sugar, Fiji’s garment industry also faced a long-running decline that was accentuated by the postcoup crisis: a thousand jobs were lost over the year to June 2009, equivalent to roughly one-fifth of the workforce (Fiji Sun, 1 Jan 2009). Gold production had resumed at Vatukoula on Viti Levu in early 2008, although with a workforce of 750, about half the
number employed before the closure in late 2006. Output fell during the first nine months of 2009, but tracked upward in the final months of the year. Bottled mineral water, which accounted for 11.4 percent of Fiji’s exports over 2006–2008, was badly hit by the slowdown in American markets in 2009. Criticism of manufacturers Natural Waters of Fiji Ltd in the September/October 2009 issue of the US magazine *Mother Jones* for putting “lipstick on a junta” and for having a heavy carbon footprint damaged the company’s credibility. Fish exports performed strongly over the year, and Levuka’s Pacific Fishing Company cannery benefited from the closure of one of the American Samoan canneries. Yet the standout industry in 2009 was clearly tourism. Visitor arrivals had fallen after the December 2006 coup but recovered strongly in late 2007 and 2008, although discounting by the major resorts subdued earnings. A further trough in early 2009, witnessed across the Pacific Islands, was due to the impact of the global recession. Arrivals from Australia and New Zealand recovered strongly from mid-2009, but then dipped later in the year with the coming of the low season. Investment in tourism and elsewhere remained at rock bottom in Fiji: An effort to auction off the aborted Momi Bay Resort development failed in August, and in March, Fijian Holdings Ltd failed to raise the necessary finance for its planned buyout of British Petroleum South West Pacific. Several companies engaged in the construction of villas and resorts on Denarau Island, close to the Nadi International Airport, were in major trouble, and the Hilton extension project had gone into receivership.

Official figures suggested that, in February, Fiji’s reserves had fallen to F$672.2 million, equivalent to 2.7 months of imports, but, in an interview with SkyNewsAustralia in May, Bainimarama acknowledged that the true figure had been “below 1.8 months” of imports. The devaluation in April eased pressure on the reserves, but inflation predictably increased as the local cost of imported goods rose. Reserves were also boosted by an International Monetary Fund (IMF) allocation of F$188 million in special drawing rights to Fiji, part of a broader global rollout of assistance in response to the international financial crisis and by restrictions on bank repatriation of profits. However, devaluation also raised the costs of servicing Fiji’s US$150 million five-year bond, which has a 7 percent per annum interest rate and falls due in 2011. IMF Article IV consultations in November concluded by commending the government “for their efforts to limit the overall deficit in 2009 to the budgeted level of 3¼ percent of GDP. This is being achieved by containing expenditure in the face of an unexpected 10 percent fall in revenue” (IMF 2009). However, the IMF press release also indicated concern that public sector debt was running at over 50 percent of gross domestic product, and criticized continued government reliance on borrowing from the Fiji National Provident Fund, Fiji’s main pension provider. The restraint in spending had been assisted by the compulsory retirement of 2,300 civil servants as a result of the reduction in the retirement age from 60 to 55.
In the decree affecting that reduction, two senior civil servants were expressly excluded—Bainimarama and Police Commissioner Esala Teleni. On 27 April, Commodore Bainimarama turned 55, and was serenaded by a military brass band that turned up to play “Happy Birthday” outside his house at 5 o’clock in the morning.

In a consultative forum on the 2010 budget in September, Bainimarama told the audience “we’re going to leapfrog” toward economic growth, pursuing objectives of “modernising Fiji, bringing it into prosperity and out of poverty.” “I’m here for power,” he said, “but power so we can do the things the right way. I am not here to abuse power. I am not here to abuse the funds, nor here to abuse the authority that I have. If it’s done, it’s because there is a reason for it. We want to keep people in line,” he explained, “We need to change people if they don’t think the way we want them to think” (FijiLive, 17 Sept 2009). The Fiji Employers’ Federation and Chamber of Commerce pushed for a protectionist budget (FijiLive, 19 Sept 2009), but in his 2010 budget address in November, Bainimarama said it was rather the IMF advice that “corresponds with the reformist agenda of my government” (Bainimarama 2009). The address outlined plans to double gross domestic product by 2020, eliminate the current account deficit, and increase tourist arrivals to 6 million, ten times the number entering Fiji in 2008. Standard & Poor’s revised its “negative” rating for Fiji to “stable” in December.

There was no improvement in Fiji’s relations with Australia, New Zealand, or the Commonwealth over 2009. Fiji was suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum in May and exclusion from the Councils of the Commonwealth was ratcheted up to full suspension in September 2009. In despair, the UN Department of Political Affairs gave up efforts to mediate after Bainimarama’s exclusion of key political parties from talks on 9 April. In November, the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Trinidad and Tobago resolved that Fiji would not participate in the Commonwealth Games scheduled for India in October 2010. Despite Fiji’s suspension, former New Zealand Governor-General Sir Paul Reeves arrived in Fiji as Commonwealth Envoy in September, but he was unable to persuade Bainimarama to resume dialogue with the politicians or to commit to early elections. Instead, Bainimarama harangued Reeves to sign on to the government’s reform program and refused to allow him to meet political leaders opposed to the regime. Continued usage of Fiji soldiers on UN peacekeeping missions was criticized by Australia and New Zealand, with Australia’s Kevin Rudd urging a “progressive replacement of Fijian troops” (The Australian, 7 Sept 2009). At a New York press conference on 21 May, UN Office of Peacekeeping chief Alain Le Roy responded off the cuff to a query: “Yes, we are trying [to replace them] but so far there is no pledges” [sic], and conceded that Fijians in Iraq “will be very difficult to replace” (ABC Pacific Beat 2009a). In November, the United Nations refused to accept Colonel Pita Driti as new head of peacekeeping operations in Iraq because of “allegations of serious human rights violations” (UN 2010).
Australian and New Zealand travel bans targeting members of the interim government and military officers, as well as their families and government appointees, were much resented in Fiji, although some critics urged their retention to prevent the regime from consolidating its influence. Hostility to the travel bans gave Bainimarama and Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum a tool with which to consolidate domestic support. In early November, a diplomatic crisis was triggered by a press conference organized by Chief Justice Anthony Gates to protest against allegedly heavy-handed Australian and New Zealand travel bans (Gates 2009). Gates had waited until six weeks after the abrogation before signing on again as chief justice, at which point he emphasized the need for “curbing excesses” after coups and “bringing the country and its institutions back to normality” (FijiLive, 23 May 2009). His November press conference was sparked by two incidents. First, Sri Lankan judges intending to travel to Fiji to take up positions on the bench had been telephoned by an Australian consular official in Colombo to warn them that taking up such appointments would render them unable to travel to Australia. Second, family court judge Anjala Wati had been refused a visa by the New Zealand High Commission to take her son to Auckland for urgent medical treatment. Although the visa was subsequently granted, Gates wrote to the commander alleging that such case-by-case exemptions entailed foreign interference with the independence of the judiciary and asked, “Can the Executive allow such interference to continue?” (ABC Pacific Beat 2009b). The once highly respected judge was clearly urging the commander to lash out against his opponents. On 3 November, Australian High Commissioner James Batley and New Zealand Acting High Commissioner Tod Cleaver were expelled, and Fiji’s Acting High Commissioner in Canberra Kamlesh Arya was hastily withdrawn in an effort to preempt the inevitable tit-for-tat retaliatory expulsion. Cleaver became the third New Zealand head of mission to be expelled from Fiji. Several days later, Labasa-born Fiji historian Brij V Lal—one of the architects of the 1997 constitution—was also ordered out of the country.

Fiji’s coups occur in two stanzas because the full repercussions of the initial overthrow of government are not immediately obvious to the perpetrators. The exception here was 2000, when the instigators were not the same as the constitution’s abrogators, but that event only confirmed another rule in Fiji politics, namely, that it is the military that decides the outcome of coups—which is why Sitiveni Rabuka succeeded in 1987, why George Speight failed in 2000, and why Frank Bainimarama remained in power in 2009. Unlike 1987 when the Republic of Fiji Military Forces “neglected to form any coalition with a civilian partner” (Scobell 1994, 197), a broad-ranging coalition opposed to Qarase’s government had been assembled prior to the 2006 coup, one particularly focused on opposition to the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill. This eased postcoup military consolidation of political power, even if former allies subsequently drifted away. In December 2006, Bainimarama had claimed
to be acting in accordance with the constitution and the “doctrine of necessity.” It was not a coup at all, he had said, but a temporary “clean up.” Since then, the coup instigators’ core themes had morphed from anticorruption to electoral reform to poverty alleviation, and the fantasy that military control masquerading as rule by presidential decree might be found constituent with the 1997 constitution had been exposed as a sham.

April 2009 proved the turning point, but it was still unclear where Fiji was heading. Ironically, the suspension of talks on the new constitution until 2012 took the pressure off Fiji’s new rulers in the sense that they no longer felt much need to explain themselves. If events went according to plan, 2010 looked set to be a year of deafening silence.

JON FRAENKEL

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**New Caledonia**

This year was a potential turning point in the decolonization of New Caledonia. The Noumea Accord of 1998 said that the country could hold a referendum on independence in 2014, and the provincial elections of May 2009 produced a Congress empowered to call for that referendum. The country already has a “double” federal relationship with France, as its three provinces have some autonomy from the territory, which in turn continues to receive more self-governing powers from Paris. France itself is integrated into the European Union, so the status of New Caledonia in some ways resembles that of a chartered town in the old medieval European hierarchy. Since 1986, the United Nations Decolonization Committee has regarded New Caledonia as a non-self-governing territory, yet it looks a bit odd on a list with much smaller, resource-poor entities such as Pitcairn Island, the Caribbean islands, Gibraltar, and the Falklands. New Caledonia has one-fourth of the world supply of nickel, and though the price per ton suffered almost a 50 percent drop over the past year because of the global economic crisis, the mining-based economy remains capable of sustainable development if the income distribution is better managed.

In this “postcolonial” phase of the country’s history, when the Noumea Accord serves as a kind of interim constitution, the political landscape is divided mainly between those who support full independence and those who want enlarged autonomy (the status quo at this point), much like the situation in French Polynesia. Unfortunately for the latter, the near-parity of independence and autonomy supporters has caused nine changes in the top leadership in Papeete since 2004, because a few politicians can switch sides and generate motions of no confidence to receive better posts in a new regime. In New Caledonia, Harold Martin of the centrist Avenir Ensemble (AE, Future Together) party, which caused a mini-revolution in local politics in 2004, explicitly urged his fellow French loyalists to unite and create a “pact of stability” to avoid a “Tahitian” situation (NC, 7 May 2009). But New Caledonia too has experienced fluctuating divisions on both sides of the political spectrum. Since the Noumea Accord brought increasing self-government, independence and autonomy are separated by concerns among the immigrant majority over economic dependency and security. For most Europeans, Asians, Polynesians, mixed-race people (métis), and some Kanak, French citizenship gives them legitimacy and safety, so they often point to signs of instability in neigh-