New Caledonia and Papua are not reviewed in this issue.

FIJI

The first nine months of 2014 in Fiji were dominated by preparations for the long-awaited 17 September election. In accordance with the “Strategic Framework for Change” set out in July 2009, a new constitution had been put in place in 2013 (see Fraenkel 2014), but the associated electoral arrangements were finalized only in March 2014. In the same month, Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama stepped down as military commander and announced the formation of his new political party, FijiFirst. Also in March, Rewa high chief Ro Teimumu Kepa became leader of the main Opposition party, the Social Democratic and Liberal Party (SODELPA, formerly the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua [SDL]). Initial polls released by the Fiji Sun’s Razor Research gave Bainimarama a commanding 79 percent lead and suggested negligible support for SODELPA (Fiji Sun, 2 March 2014), but these were widely considered untrustworthy. As the polling day drew closer, a Times-Tebbutt poll found 21 percent support for SODELPA and 45 percent for FijiFirst, implying that the gap was narrowing and encouraging expectations of a preelection surge in support for the Opposition (Fiji Times, 6 Sept 2014).

In the heated atmosphere of early September, Bainimarama expressed reservations about holding an election at all, accused SODELPA of exacerbating ethnic divisions and of planning to release 2000 coup leader George Speight, and said that Suva would not be allowed to “burn” again (RNZI, 4 Sept 2014; Fiji Sun, 4 Sept 2014; FBC, 11 Sept 2014). Heroic interpretations of the military’s response to the Speight coup of May 2000 had long been used to consolidate rank-and-file control in the army (see Bainimarama 2014a). Now, in the context of the election campaign, these were used to remind the minority communities about the risk of instability in the event of a poor showing for FijiFirst.

If the early September poll was correct, voter loyalties polarized in the weeks before the polls, with the smaller parties losing support. The final outcome gave FijiFirst 59.2 percent of the national vote and 32 of the 50 parliamentary seats, a landslide victory. SODELPA had 15 seats and 28.2 percent of the national vote. The only other party to cross the 5 percent threshold was the National Federation Party (NFP), which obtained the remaining 3 seats. The Fiji Labour Party (FLP), which had obtained 39.2 percent of the national vote in 2006, slumped to 2.4 percent. The People’s Democratic Party (PDP)—a breakaway from the FLP—fared only slightly better, with 3.2 percent. Predictably, given the high threshold, the two independents obtained few votes.

Owing to Fiji’s history of election-triggered coups, fears of military inter-
vention inevitably lurked in the background during the 2014 campaign, or at least they did so as long as the result was uncertain. Bainimarama’s replacement as military commander, former Land Force Commander Brigadier Mosese Tikoitoga, said in April that the role of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) was to defend the new constitution and that “whatever government the people choose, we will support it.” However, he also warned that “if people throw out the current constitution as current political parties are talking about—then they have thrown out the chance of avoiding coups” (Islands Business, April 2014; RNZI, 24 June 2014; FijiLive, 21 June 2014). The desire to keep the military out of politics may have been genuine, but that commitment proved difficult to sustain, particularly for an institution as intertwined with the fabric of Fijian life as the RFMF. In July, the RFMF announced it was severing all ties with former military officer and SODELPA candidate Ratu Suliano Matanitobua after he appealed to the people of Namosi to put obligations to the vanua (indigenous system) over loyalties to the RFMF (FijiLive, 31 July 2014). Immunities for actions taken during the 2006 coup and thereafter were entrenched in the 2013 Constitution and these were as vital to the RFMF senior command as they were to the government leadership. Hence, the military top brass carefully guarded its rehabilitated constitutional responsibility “to ensure at all times, the security, defence and well-being of Fiji and all Fijians” (Fiji Government 2013, section 131 (2) [section 5 (1) provides that “all citizens of Fiji shall be known as Fijians”]). Shortly before the election, it was announced that the new commander was relocating to an office in Berkley Crescent, close to the nerve centers of government (Fiji Sun, 12 June 2014).

The 2014 election was fought using a new uniquely candidate-centered, open-list, proportional representation (PR) system. Open-list systems by definition center on choices of political party as well as candidate, but Fiji’s ballot paper offered no obvious party choice whatsoever. Only the candidates’ allotted numbers were visible on the ballot papers, not their party affiliations. Nevertheless, as in Finland and Brazil, it was the party tallies that were indirectly critical for determining how many seats each party won. Individual candidate tallies were summed at the counting center to reach party tallies, thus determining how many seats each party obtained. Only after this calculation of party seat entitlements did the highest intra-party personal votes determine which of each party’s candidates were elected (for further detail on the difference between open- and closed-list PR systems, see ACE 2015). Also unusually for open-list PR systems, the 2014 election was fought using a single national constituency (see the discussion by electoral commissioner Father David Arms of a model using three, four, or five multimember constituencies [Arms 2012]). The voting age was reduced from 21 to 18, and Fiji citizens residing in other countries were for the first time entitled to vote.

Most importantly, this was Fiji’s first general election without communal rolls. Ever since 1929, Fiji’s general elections had separated “Fijians,” “Indians,” and “Others” by race, and
required each ethnic group to cast ballots entailing choices of leaders within their communities (though often with supplementary votes cast in “cross-voting” [1966], “national” [1972–1987], or “open” [1999–2006] constituencies on a common roll).

Within Fiji, this major 2014 change was often misleadingly described as serving to “eliminate racial voting,” largely because the latter had been one of Bainimarama’s 2012 “non-negotiable” provisions expected of the new constitution (for a discussion of these deliberations, see Fraenkel 2013). What the new electoral framework did do was remove the institutional endorsement of race-based voting and end the long-standing gerrymander in favor of rural parts of the country.

Voter registration in 2014 was up 23 percent over 2006 levels, partly reflecting the new enfranchisement of those aged 18 to 21. Turnout was also high, averaging 84 percent, despite the abandonment of compulsory voting. The 5 percent threshold discouraged independents, who would have needed 24,819 votes to gain a single seat. If they failed to reach that threshold, votes for the smaller parties also entailed wasted votes. The Electoral Decree forbade candidates who had “been convicted of any offence under any law for which the maximum penalty is a term of imprisonment of 12 months or more” (Fiji Government 2014, section 23, paragraph 4). That ruled out deposed Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, who had served a one-year prison sentence in 2012–2013, and also disqualified FLP leader and former Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry. Mr Chaudhry was convicted of exchange control fraud in early 2014, but eventually—aft the election—he avoided a fifteen-month prison term by paying a fine of F$2 million (approximately US$1,080,000 in mid-2014). Without its longtime leader, the FLP polled poorly. Its former strongholds in the sugarcane belts of Ba (western Viti Levu) and Macuata (northern Vanua Levu) instead gave majority support to FijiFirst.

Other would-be candidates were also prohibited from contesting. SODELPA’s preferred representative for the Lau Islands, sacked civil servant Anare Jale, had his nomination rejected on the grounds that (due to his termination) he had been working as a consultant in Solomon Islands and thus was claimed not to be, as required under a belated July amendment to the Electoral Decree, “ordinarily resident in Fiji for at least 2 years immediately before being nominated” (Fiji Government 2014, section 23, paragraph 4[c]; PINA, 4 Aug 2014).

Disagreement flared between the Electoral Commission and Supervisor of Elections Mohammed Saneem after the latter decided to allow FijiFirst’s Praveen Bala Kumar to contest, despite his being a public officer at the time of nomination, and to incorrectly disqualify one of the FLP candidates (RNZI, 23 Aug 2014; FijiLive, 23 Aug 2014). The commission tried to reverse both decisions, but the supervisor said that their advice had come too late (RNZI, 26 Aug 2014; Islands Business, Aug 2014). The commissioners boycotted the announcement of the National Candidate List on 23 August and took the matter to court,
though the case was dismissed on the grounds that the three-day time limit for objections was valid in law (High Court of Fiji 2014). The dispute briefly threatened to ruin the credibility of the election administration, but resignations were avoided. Allegations of bias were inevitable: the supervisor had close links to the attorney-general, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, who had retained his position as minister of elections throughout the campaign despite simultaneously assuming the role of general-secretary of FijiFirst.

Media censorship was gradually relaxed over 2012–2014 but remained an important constraint for the Opposition parties. The C J Patel–owned Fiji Sun and the state-owned Fiji Broadcasting Corporation—run by the attorney-general’s brother, Riaz Sayed-Khaiyum—were strongly pro-government. Other media outlets, particularly the Fiji Times and Fiji Television, were kept in line by regular harassment through the courts or by controls over licensing arrangements (FijiVillage, 27 Nov 2012; RNZI, 6 June 2012). Self-censorship had become endemic, as journalists adjusted to controls under the 2010 Media Industry Development Decree.

Early in the campaign, Media Industry Development Authority Chairman Ashwin Raj threatened to take action against “hate speech” after Verata chief Ratu Timoci Vesikula publicly appealed to Bainimarama not to trust his newfound Fiji-Indian allies on the grounds that the two communities were as dissimilar as “kerosene and water” (Repúблиka 2014). Instead of taking the opportunity to emphasize FijiFirst’s multiethnic agenda, Bainimarama had reportedly sat unmoved through Vesikula’s speech in Verata. The hornet’s nest had been stirred only on the prime minister’s return to Suva, where the favored reaction was punitive rather than political. On election night, Raj had no qualms about appearing on Fiji TV as an overt supporter of FijiFirst.

FijiFirst’s strategy was to seek to maximize the personal vote for Bainimarama, who was able to obtain 202,459 votes (40.8% of the national vote, or 68.9% of the FijiFirst vote). The party’s campaign propaganda focused on the politics of modernization, and described opponents as “dirty,” “old,” and “corrupt” politicians who were together forming a “coalition of the hypocrites” (Bainimarama 2014b; FBC, 21 Jan 2014). FijiFirst was registered in May with 40,083 signatures, well in excess of the 5,000 required under the Political Parties Decree (Fiji TV News, 5 May 2014; FijiLive, 19 May 2014).

On the campaign trail, Bainimarama contested claims that his government would undermine security of native land tenure or dismantle indigenous traditional institutions. The prime minister’s fund-raising meetings in Auckland and Sydney in August were well attended, as were rallies held in the towns of western Viti Levu. In a departure from his usual critical stance toward the government, Professor Wadan Narsey—an economist terminated from the University of the South Pacific in obedience to political pressures—described Bainimarama on the campaign trail as “like a man possessed, travelling the length and breath of Fiji as no previous elected leader has done, addressing local community needs in education, health, roads,
water etc. some of it quite positive for Fiji’s development,” and speculating “who knows, he may be a changed man in parliament, like Rabuka” (Narsey 2014b). (Sitiveni Rabuka was the 1987 coup leader who later embraced the 1997 Constitution and formed an alliance with the main Fiji-Indian Opposition leader, Jai Ram Reddy.) During the early years of its tenure, the Bainimarama administration had been deeply unpopular within the ethnic Fijian community. Acutely aware of this and the fact that ethnic Fijians now formed around 60 percent of the population, the government had become adept at micromanaging loyalties, through both intimidation and enticements and by making great play of public acquiescence by former adversaries (including videos of such events posted on YouTube by the Ministry of Information).

Economic recovery after 2010 greatly assisted the government’s efforts to cultivate support among former opponents. Gross domestic product was estimated to have grown by 4.6 percent in 2013 and by 3.8 percent in 2014 (IMF 2014, 4). Tax revenue was up 17.3 percent for the year ending September 2014. Government debt levels had declined since 2013 but, if the liabilities of state-owned corporations are included, were still close to 80 percent of gross domestic product (ADB 2014). The budget deficit stood at 7.8 percent for 2014, according to International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates, but this rested on uncertain expectations of state asset sales that were to be delayed until after the election (IMF 2014, 5). That budget had given substantial pay raises to civil servants. In the run-up to the election, the government distributed large numbers of sewing machines, brush cutters, and chainsaws mostly to indigenous villagers. New roads around eastern Viti Levu and northern Vanua Levu cultivated support among those long accustomed to official neglect. Subsidized primary education and free bus fares for school children encouraged the depiction of the incumbents as a development-oriented administration intent on lifting living standards.

The SODELPA campaign emphasized threats to Fijian landownership and the negative experience of many in the indigenous community during the eight years since the December 2006 coup. Alongside party leader Ro Teimumu Kepa (Roko Tui Dreketi), other prominent candidates were also from the traditional chiefly hierarchy, including the Tui Cakau, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, from Cakaudrove. SODELPA was deeply hostile to the 2013 Constitution and its declaration of Fiji as a “secular state.” The party wanted to reinstate the disbanded Great Council of Chiefs and revive the Qoliqoli Bill, a controversial piece of legislation drafted under the Qarase government and aimed at increasing indigenous incomes accruing from coastal and reef areas (SODELPA 2014; RNZI, 22 July 2014). These policy stances appealed largely to older Fijians, but less so to younger and newly enfranchised Fijians.

Bainimarama succeeded in putting SODELPA on the defensive on key issues, such as the party’s proposals to turn Fiji into a “Christian state.” Claims that FijiFirst would privatize communally held land were countered
by highlighting land sales under previous ethno-nationalist governments, including the Momi Bay and Denarau tourism developments in western Viti Levu. A letter circulated to all fifty-six divisions of the Methodist Church warning voters not to be “swayed” by “the developments carried out” generated a furious reaction by the prime minister (Fiji Sun, 25 Sept 2014; FBC, 25 Sept 2014).

On key issues where the government was potentially vulnerable, such as government corruption and the declaration of personal assets required under the Political Parties Decree, SODELPA failed to put strong pressure on Bainimarama and cabinet ministers contesting under the FijiFirst banner. Critically, this was the first Fiji general election fought by a mainstream indigenous party from a position in Opposition. In all previous elections, the largest ethnic Fijian–backed party had always campaigned as the incumbent, increasing the likelihood that potentially dissident areas would render grudging support. Whenever out of government, the mainstream indigenous party had been returned by way of a constitutional crisis (1977) or a coup (in 1987 and 2000). Contesting from a position in Opposition required a set of political skills quite different from those employed at previous elections, and these were not easily learned in the run up to the September 2014 polls.

Polling took place on a single day, 17 September, in contrast to the previous practice of allowing a week for the casting of ballots. The task was eased by “pre-polling” of fifty thousand voters, mostly those on outer islands and in isolated parts of the interior. A two-day preelection media blackout was rigorously enforced. On the main Election Day itself, polling was conducted reasonably smoothly, but the announcement of provisional tallies phoned in from the polling stations was poorly handled. Counting was abruptly halted early on 18 September and recommenced from scratch, based instead on the more reliable official paperwork sent in from the polling venues. Many citizens were left bewildered, and they were encouraged in this sentiment by defeated politicians’ allegations of malpractice (see the report in The Australian, 18 Sept 2014).

The multinational observer group (MOG), led by Australia, Indonesia, and India—eager to offer an early initial verdict and in some cases to quickly depart the country—called a press conference at 4 pm on 18 September before the full results had officially been announced. The observers declared the election “credible,” said that “the conditions were in place for Fijians to exercise their right to vote freely,” and concluded that the result was on track to “broadly represent the will of the people” (FijiLive, 18 Sept 2014). Aware of the impending MOG event, the Opposition parties called a rival press conference outside the counting center at the FMF Dome, also at 4 pm on 18 September, and claimed evidence of ballot rigging and electoral fraud. One Fiji leader, Filimoni Vosa­rogo, whose party had secured only 1.2 percent of the national vote, failed to turn up at the Opposition press conference. In the days that followed, the initial shock felt at FijiFirst’s landslide victory faded, and the PDP withdrew from the joint press state-
ment (FijiVillage, 22 Sept 2014). The final Opposition statement contained claims of election irregularities (FLP-NFP-SODELPA 2014), but the supervisor and the chair of the Electoral Commission competently accounted for most of these (Fijian Electoral Commission 2014; Fiji Times, 21 Sept 2014). No evidence was presented by the Opposition showing how alleged misdemeanors had influenced the overall result. Ultimately, no disputed returns were lodged with the courts.

Geographically, support for FijiFirst was reasonably evenly spread across the country, in both urban and rural areas, and in both the poorer settlements and richer suburbs (for more detail, see Fraenkel 2015). Of the four divisions, SODELPA had majority backing (63.2%) only in the Eastern Division (covering the Lau and Lomaiviti island groups), despite a FijiFirst majority on tiny Rotuma (administratively counted as part of the Eastern Division despite being in the country’s extreme northwest). SODELPA also had a sizable share of support in the Northern Division (36.2%), particularly in the rural areas of Vanua Levu. These are parts of the country with relatively small populations, where indigenous villagers are mostly engaged in subsistence cultivation and fishing, and from which there exist high rates of outmigration to the Suva-Nausori corridor. By contrast, FijiFirst had 68.8 percent of the vote in the Western Division and 55.9 percent of the vote in the Central Division. These are the most densely populated areas, with the lion’s share of the country’s formal sector jobs. Taken together, the Eastern and Northern accounted for 18.8 percent of the vote, while the Western and Central divisions accounted for 79.7 percent. The residual, 1.4 percent, was made up of postal ballots, of which 55 percent were cast for FijiFirst.

Parliament was no longer to sit at the magnificent purpose-built complex out at Veiuto, the epicenter of George Speight’s failed May 2000 coup. Instead, the assembly was to be relocated to its pre-1987 home in Government Buildings in central Suva, a shift symbolic of efforts to end the twenty-seven-year-old so-called coup culture by returning to the venue where soldiers had first wielded guns to depose an elected government. Bainimarama’s government would no longer be conducted by decree but would be constrained to operate through parliamentary procedure. It was to prove a difficult transition. After the election, Bainimarama spoke—without magnanimity—about meeting again in Parliament with the “losers” and “liars I met on the campaign trail” (Fiji Sun, 19 Sept 2014; FijiLive, 24 Sept 2014). No olive branch would be extended to the Opposition parties.

The new Speaker was Jiko Luveni, who stood down as a FijiFirst member of Parliament to take up the post. Ro Teimumu Kepa became leader of the Opposition. The NFP’s Dr Biman Prasad was made shadow finance minister and chair of the Public Accounts Committee, tasked with reviewing the thirty-two auditor-general reports covering 2007–2013 that were published soon after the election (OAG 2014). Among those reports was evidence of major expenditures over budget by the RFMF and confirmation that ministerial salaries had for years been paid...
outside normal channels through Aliz Pacific, an accounting firm owned by Nur Bano Ali, the aunt of the attorney-general (Auditor-General’s Report 2010, volume 2, section 4, page 11; Narsey 2014a; Fraenkel 2012). In the new parliament, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum would play a prime ministerial-style role, as well as serving as attorney-general (a post he only briefly relinquished to Faiyaz Koya but then reassumed within a few days) and holding the portfolios for finance, public enterprises, public service, and communications. Bainimarama would continue to play a more presidential role, traveling regularly overseas and touring Fiji on official visits.

Parliamentary proceedings were to be live-streamed on the Internet. November 2014 was the budget sitting, with the 2015 spending plans pushed through by way of the solid FijiFirst majority and in the face of a SODELPA walkout (Fiji Times, 9 Dec 2014). Disagreement flared over a law to restrict urban land sales to foreigners and—above all—when contractual disputes meant that the Fijian Sevens rugby team’s performance in Dubai could not be screened live on national TV. Potential lines of cross-party linkage existed, but the constitutional provision regarding forfeit of seats in the event of expulsion could be expected to stiffen party loyalties into the distant future. Much bad blood remained. In his maiden speech, SODELPA’s Niko Nawaikula said he “despised” the FijiFirst members of Parliament, called for another constitutional review, and said that failure to do so would constitute “an invitation for another coup” (Hansard, 15 Oct 2014). Bainimarama responded that the government would be “keeping an eye” on Nawaikula and threatened to bring him in “for questioning” (FBC, 16 Oct 2014; FijiLive, 17 Oct 2014).

Use of surveillance technologies was well known: Vodafone admitted to having allowed 760 Fiji phone taps in 2013 (The Guardian, 6 June 2014). Public justification of stiffer forms of repression had also become a familiar part of the political landscape, and this did not abate after the election. In 2013, the gruesome torture of two escaped prisoners by the security forces was shown in a widely circulated video, but—to the horror of Amnesty International—the officers’ actions were publicly defended by Bainimarama (Amnesty International 2014). In June 2014, military commander Brigadier Tikoitoga justified beatings of opponents to “stave off civil disorder” (Tikoitoga, quoted in The Age, 20 June 2014). After the September election, the new police commissioner, Ben Groenewald, said he was investigating allegations that a sixty-year-old teacher, Josefa Bilitaki, had been assaulted by army officers. Bilitaki had allegedly sent angry text messages to Bainimarama, claiming that his songs had been used without authorization in FijiFirst’s campaign materials (ABC, 1 Oct 2014).

These were not isolated cases or departures from an otherwise nonviolent ideology. At the October 2014 postelection budget forum, FijiFirst supporters looked sympathetically to Lee Kwan Yew’s Singapore as a model of an initially impoverished and ethnically divided state where an “autocratic government” had needed “to suspend a large measure of their [citizens’] freedom” in order to
achieve long-run economic development (Delaibatiki 2014).

With Parliament once again sitting, obstacles had been removed to a full rapprochement with Australia, New Zealand, and the European Union. Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop had visited in February, signaling a warming of relations. After Bainimarama stepped down as RFMF commander in March, the remaining travel bans had been dropped, various aid-funded programs were announced, and Fiji was to be brought into the Australian seasonal workers’ program (The Australian, 15 Feb 2014). A “credible” election had been critical for both bilateral and multilateral partners, and the standards of what constituted “credibility” were not too exacting. The Asian Development Bank now promised US$350 million, and the World Bank was also poised to embark on a new program of lending, triggering expectations of an economic boom (FBC, 21 Oct 2014). The remaining Australian and New Zealand sanctions were now dropped. Fiji was readmitted to the Commonwealth and allowed, if it chose to do so, to return to the Pacific Islands Forum.

Earlier, Bainimarama had insisted that Fiji would not rejoin the Forum unless there was a major reorganization of the Pacific regional architecture, including the exclusion as members of Australia and New Zealand. Keen to avoid any dispute, Australian Foreign Minister Bishop proposed a summit to address these concerns in early 2015. Diplomatic relations would meanwhile be restored between Canberra and Suva, including the exchange of high commissioners (Kubuabola and Bishop 2014).

Not everything on the diplomatic front was plain sailing. Frictions with Papua New Guinea (PNG) continued with a dispute over the selection of Dame Meg Taylor as the Forum’s new secretary-general instead of former Fiji Foreign Minister Kaliopate Tavola (ABC, 7 Aug 2014). “Backstabbed” was the Fiji Sun’s headline (4 Aug 2014), echoing claims that PNG Prime Minister Peter O’Neill had reneged on a deal with Fiji. Yet even this could not overshadow the pinnacle of Bainimarama’s 2014 success in projecting himself as a regional leader. On route from the Group of 20 (G20) summit in Brisbane, both Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Fiji at different points in November, hosting summits in the country also with other Pacific Island leaders. Modi addressed the new Parliament, though the session was unwisely boycotted by SODELPA’s fifteen members.

Commentators speculated that the timing of these diplomatic visits was triggered by Sino-Indian tensions and claimed that New Delhi felt “threatened by China’s expanding presence in this Indo-Pacific region” (Balaji Chandramohan, quoted by RNZI, 11 Nov 2014). More plausibly, Fiji’s heightened diplomatic activity on the world stage (including new embassies across the globe, 2013 chairmanship of the Group of 77 [G77], and the establishment of the Suva-based Pacific Islands Development Forum; see Firth 2013), as well as the Fiji government’s willingness to take an independent stance from Australia, enhanced its attractive-
mess as a stopping-off point in the age of US President Barrack Obama’s so-called pivot or rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific. Other regional players too were keen to respond to the perceived heightened geostrategic significance of Fiji. Also in November, Australia’s defense-funded think tank, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, proposed that Canberra fund a regional peacekeeping center at Black Rock Camp in Nadi (The Australian, 24 Nov 2014). A succession of senior military officers from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States visited Fiji in late 2014, eager to rejuvenate defense linkages now that the perceived political impediments had been removed. Fiji thus entered 2015 with the context much changed from that at the start of 2014, both on the domestic and international fronts, but it remained a country deeply unsettled.

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