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Melanesia in Review:
Issues and Events, 1988

FIJI
The dominating feature of 1988 for Fiji was its attempt to come to terms with the consequences of the preceding year’s two military coups. While many claimed the country had now changed irrevocably through the installation of de facto military rule, the Rabuka-dominated order, with Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau as President and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara continuing as Prime Minister in an interim government, accorded urgency to persuading publics at home and abroad that Fiji was returning to normal. For the Australian, New Zealand, United States, British, and neighboring South Pacific governments, there was a predisposition to take the regime at its word about its intentions. For the Mara government, the major objectives on the road to acceptability included acquisition of legitimacy via constitutional change, economic recovery through incentives and enlistment of foreign interests, and, not least, keeping a firm local lid on a potentially volatile mix of social, political, and ethnic conflict.

The proposed constitutional reformulation, in particular intentions about parliamentary representation, saw details drip fed through a series of far from consistent statements. Through a major address to the nation in March, Ratu Sir Kamisese said that it was the intention of his interim administration to “hold free and open elections once a broadly acceptable constitution was completed.” Nevertheless this would “have to ensure the full protection of the fundamental interests and concerns of the indigenous Fijian people, but at the same time accommodate on a fair and equitable basis the position of other communities” (PIM, May 1988, 37).

Yet in July, when details for such a single chamber parliament comprising 71 seats were announced, such principles of equity were hardly in evidence. Indians would elect 22 representatives from a communal roll; Fijians would have 28 representatives although, inter-
estingly, these individuals would be elected indirectly through the existing provincial council structure. As well as being a denial of basic suffrage for future Fijian electors, this measure was obviously designed to empower local chiefs. Other races, so-called general voters, would elect 8 representatives, while Rotumans would have 1. Of the 12 remaining seats, all would be filled by appointment: 8 by the president, 4 by the prime minister (both posts reserved for Fijians), with 1 seat among these being permanently reserved for the current commander of the country’s security forces.

As outlined, the proposal was a blatant gerrymander that favored the dominating eastern chiefly establishment. By abolishing the former system of national election, where almost half of the candidates elected to the lower house of parliament were elected by “cross-voting” of electors of all races, the plan stymied any chance of a party winning a majority of seats by multiracial appeals. And for bodies such as the increasingly fragmented Taukei movement and Fijian Nationalist Party, which had previously campaigned with vigor against aspects of chiefly rule at election time, that opportunity was now curtailed.

Aware of these disquiets, and mindful that public discussion had been driven underground, the regime went through the motions of consultation by establishing a Constitution Inquiry and Advisory Committee headed by Colonel P. Manueli, a Rotuman and former commander of the Royal Fiji Military Force. While Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau called on the public to cooperate with this body, he acknowledged that soundings about constitutional acceptability had to realize there must be a just and honest appreciation of the special position of the indigenous Fijian community. While Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara expressed hope that free and open elections under the proposed plan would be possible before the end of 1989, Rabuka himself was far less forthcoming. For Dr Timoci Bavadra, ousted as prime minister by the May 1987 coup, the plan was undemocratic, discriminatory, and unacceptable.

Questions as to whether Rabuka was sincere about any effective return to the civil rule of law were sharpened by his June promulgation of sweeping security provisions by decree. This provided for immediate arrest, detention, and search without warrant—measures that were employed arbitrarily to silence and intimidate academics, lawyers, unionists, journalists, and dissenters. Leading public figures accorded such treatment included Fiji Times editor Vijendra Kumar, foreign minister in the ousted Bavadra government, Krishna Datt, and the unionist Mahendra Chaudhry. These sweeps were especially intense at mid-year following the discovery by Sydney customs authorities of an arms cache presumed destined for Lautoka, and the subsequent arrest by British police of an Indo-Fijian, M. R. Kahan, charged with implication in planning this shipment.

Civil rights abuses by the regime were criticized by Amnesty International and the Indian government, while Australia indicated that any further increase of aid to Fiji would remain conditional on progress toward a return to constitutional rule and
relaxation of the June security decree. Under these conditions, it was not surprising that of the 3200 people who left Fiji on a permanent basis during the first seven months of 1988, 86 percent were of Indian origin.

To combat sluggish economic performance, where inflation rose to 11 percent and where unemployment was at an official rate of 10 percent, the regime was active in attempting to attract foreign investment. This included plans for a tax-free zone permitting foreign enterprises with heavy export orientation generous long-term concessions, the establishment of foreign textile concerns using cheap local labor, and the sale of tourist and hotel assets to holdings such as the Japan-based Electrical Industrial Enterprises.

Because of retrenchment and a decline in imports, two devaluations of the Fiji dollar in 1987, and reasonably buoyant world sugar prices, the country's foreign exchange holdings remained healthy at over F$200 million for most of 1988. Otherwise stringent regulations regarding Sabbath observance were relaxed to permit cane harvesting. For the longer term, and in respect of operations such as the tourist industry, the economic future of Fiji was seen as depending critically on whether continuing political uncertainty could be resolved and confidence restored.

Throughout Fiji during the year, social conditions on a daily basis remained outwardly calm, though such placidity was deceptive. Relations between the two major communities remained sullen and distant. While Dr Bavadra attempted to rebuild support for his Labour Party along multiracial lines in west Viti Levu, his September claims that the power of prayer had facilitated an accommodation with a faction of the Taukei movement headed by the extremist Ratu Meli Vesikula received a mixed response among Indian leaders.

Although the University of the South Pacific maintained a full program throughout the year, Pacific Islands leaders conferring at their regular Forum meeting in September (where Fiji was kept off the formal agenda), expressed private concern at the university's longer term prospects. Within a climate of growing conservatism and fear of debate or criticism, such concern seemed justifiable. Finally, the year for Fiji was perhaps most fittingly epitomized by Rabuka's decision, on the eve of the republic's first anniversary, to promote himself forthwith to the rank of major general.

Roderic Alley

New Caledonia

A dramatic shift in the political situation of New Caledonia occurred during 1988 with the change of government in France from the conservative President Chirac to the second socialist presidency of François Mitterrand. Solidly conservative policies were in place in the territory following the September 1987 referendum, in which almost all of the 59 percent of the population that voted favored New Caledonia remaining part of France. Despite the strong opposition of the major Melanesian political coalition, the Front de Libération Nationale Kanake et Socialiste (FLNKS), the minister for overseas departments and territories, Bernard