Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 1989

FIJI

The year began with a pledge by Interim Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara that a new constitution “acceptable to the majority of the people” would be promulgated before his government’s term expired on 5 December. The Constitutional Inquiry and Advisory Committee, appointed by cabinet in October 1988, continued its public hearings on the so-called draft constitution in the first half of the year, receiving a total of 209 submissions. This opportunity to comment publicly on the draft constitution served as a catalyst for political mobilization at all levels of society.

The strong opposition voiced by the National Federation Party/Labour coalition and by many Indian organizations was expected, since the draft constitution was designed to formally discriminate against the Indo-Fijian population. But the criticisms of a much wider cross-section of the public (including ethnic Fijians) must have concerned the government. There was clearly no consensus on the constitution, even among the traditionally conservative Fijian provincial councils, some of which argued that it did not go far enough to protect Fijian interests.

Two issues were of particular significance in undermining Fijian unity, or perhaps more accurately, exposing the myth of Fijian unity. The first concerned the proposed “rights and representation” of Fijians from western Viti Levu (Fiji’s largest island). Building on a long history of grievances stemming from the domination of Fijian politics by eastern chiefs, western leaders declared the creation of a fourth (western) confederacy, the Yasayasa Vakara. This challenged the chiefly status quo, which was built on three confederacies. However, western Fijians were not united over the issue. A group closely aligned to the deposed coalition government and its leader, Dr Timoci Bavadra, was strongly critical of the draft constitution’s provisions for western Fiji. Other advocates of the fourth confederacy supported the interim government and, with few reservations, the draft constitution.

This issue presented the interim government with a dilemma. If the Council of Chiefs was called into session to discuss the confederacy proposal, the constitution could also be discussed. But this raised the question of whether the council should be convened as three confederacies or four. (A restructuring of the council in 1987 meant that representation at council meetings was now based on confederacies.) The interim government chose to shelve the issue to avoid a possible major confrontation between supporters and opponents of the fourth confederacy. Since the Council of Chiefs was to be the final arbiter of the new constitution, this decision also served to delay any action on the draft constitution.

The second divisive issue centered on the role of Christian religion in the proposed new political system. The commitment to the “teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ” in the preamble of the draft constitution reflected the
wishes of Methodist fundamentalists, who wield influence in the army and in the Fijian (taukei) nationalist movement. The interim government had also supported fundamentalist sentiment by adopting a Sunday Observance Decree that banned all public activity and work on Sunday. Pressures on the government to relax the decree had led to some lifting of restrictions in late 1988, a move bitterly opposed by some Methodist leaders.

The rift within the Methodist church, between militant fundamentalists and a more moderate faction, deepened in January when General Secretary Manasa Lasaro was dismissed for organizing roadblocks to protest the relaxation of the Sunday Observance Decree. But in February, the militant faction instigated a “palace coup,” replacing president Josateki Koroi with hardliner Isireli Caucau, suspending the church constitution, and installing a new governing council. Lasaro was reinstated as general secretary.

Attempts by the interim government to heal the rift failed, and Koroi won a court order supporting his position as president. Lasaro was convicted of contempt of court for ignoring the court order, and in May received a three-month suspended jail sentence.

Largely to reassure cane farmers, the government suspended most of the provisions of the Sunday Observance Decree on 30 May, although bans on trading and organized sport remained in force. The decision fueled the fires of Methodist fundamentalism, or perhaps more accurately, the power struggle within the church. Despite their suspended jail sentences, Lasaro and his followers began a roadblock campaign in the northern town of Labasa that was designed to disrupt the transport of cane on Sundays. Fifty-seven militants were arrested and jailed for up to six months in late July.

In early August General Rabuka authorized the release of all the jailed militants under Compulsory Supervision Orders. This dramatic intervention not only signaled Rabuka’s defiance of Ratu Mara and government policy, and his own collaboration with the Methodist militants, but also challenged the integrity of the legal process. The expected showdown with Ratu Mara was averted as the interim government turned its attention to the report of the Constitutional Inquiry and Advisory Committee, which was presented to the president at the end of August, and to the visit by French Prime Minister Michel Rocard in the same month.

Although the committee’s report was not publicly released until 20 September, its contents were known well before then. It recommended some changes to “controversial” provisions in the draft constitution. These included removing the army commander from government, diluting the reference to religion in the preamble, and checking the power of the executive on the issue of citizenship. But the committee reaffirmed the “inevitable disparity” of Fijian and Indian political representation and recommended only marginal changes to the distribution of seats in parliament. The communal electoral system would remain the only form of voting. In an apparent concession to the calls for greater “protection” of Fijian interests and greater powers for the Fijian chiefs, the report recom-
mended a second chamber of parliament, to be called the Senate of Chiefs. This would comprise nominees of the Council of Chiefs and have power of veto over laws affecting Fijian land and customary rights. In addition, the committee recommended the creation of a twelve-member President’s Advisory Council comprising heads of the Confederacies, former heads of state, and other “distinguished citizens.”

Predictably, reaction to the report was mixed. Cautious voices advocated support on the grounds that it was the best that could be hoped for. Coalition leaders, and later a constitutional summit of Indo-Fijians, rejected the recommendations, as they had rejected the draft constitution, for entrenching racial discrimination and denying equal rights to a majority of the citizens of Fiji.

Meanwhile, concern that the army might take matters into its own hands mounted when a report that had been presented to the prime minister and president in May was leaked to the press in late September. This detailed analysis of Fiji’s problems, by a group of army officers led by General Rabuka, recommended that a new interim government succeed the existing one; elections be postponed for up to fifteen years; the army commander be given more executive authority; government be restructured based on the Fijian administration and customary law; a state religion be imposed; the trade unions be suspended; land tenure law be revised to favor landlords rather than tenants; and that foreign policy be reoriented toward Southeast Asia, the United States, and France, and away from the British Commonwealth. In the event, both Ratu Mara and General Rabuka indicated their support for the report of the Constitutional Inquiry and Advisory Committee, but not what they would do with it.

On 29 September, Ratu Mara ended many months of speculation by declaring his intention to stay in office for up to two more years, at which time a new constitution would be put in place and elections held. This suggested that a constitution would not be promulgated for at least a year. Ratu Mara’s decision to postpone his retirement was contingent on General Rabuka and the other military officers in government choosing between politics and the army. Within a week, Rabuka stated his intention to resign as minister for home affairs and return to the barracks.

The prospect of a continuation of the political status quo was welcomed by the business community, which had clearly been favored by the economic policies of the interim government. Wage restrictions remained in place while the government continued to withhold recognition of the Fiji Trades Union Congress and encourage racially based splinter unions. Privatization of statutory bodies was promoted and deregulation of the manufacturing sector mooted. Tax-free factories flourished. The economy was expected to grow by 3.7 percent in 1990.

However, discontent with the prospect of a continuation of Mara’s rule was apparent in other quarters. The coalition voiced its suspicion that Ratu Mara had no intention of relinquishing power, noting his refusal to engage in a dialogue with them regarding the con-
stitution and possible power sharing.

Far more troubling was the response of extremists within the Methodist church and Fijian nationalist movement. Opposed to both Ratu Mara and the Constitutional Inquiry and Advisory Committee recommendations, these extremists favored “solutions” similar to those proposed by the army officers in May. Their radicalism was demonstrated on 15 October when a Muslim mosque and three Hindu temples were gutted by firebombs in the western city of Lautoka. These attacks were part of a nation-wide campaign aimed ostensibly at opposing the relaxation of the Sunday Observance Decree, but more generally at undermining the interim government and perhaps at precipitating military intervention.

To the Indo-Fijian population, the Lautoka firebombings were violations of immeasurable proportion. Communal unity was forged. Shops, businesses, and schools closed to demonstrate mourning and solidarity. University students stayed away from classes. Celebrations marking the Hindu festival of light, Diwali, were canceled. However, calm was maintained and the feared spiral of violence failed to materialize. Instead the country was plunged into a different kind of mourning by the death from cancer of coalition leader, Dr Timoci Bavadra, on 3 November.

No single event since the coup has had such a momentous impact. Dr Bavadra’s funeral at the chiefly village of Viseisei was witnessed by one of the largest gatherings in Fiji’s history. Up to sixty thousand people attended or tried to attend. The event was testament to the strength of support for Dr Bavadra as well as the cause with which he was identified.

The loss of Dr Bavadra’s leadership was regarded as a major challenge and setback for the coalition. However, within weeks Adi Kuini Bavadra, Dr Bavadra’s widow and a high chief, was named the movement’s new leader. This bold and astute move promised to retain the coalition’s multiracial following and the loyalty that Dr Bavadra had inspired.

If members of the interim government felt uncomfortable having to respect and accommodate the mourning of the deposed prime minister it was not evident. Both the president and the interim prime minister were overseas at the time. The army was spared the embarrassing task of giving a state funeral to the prime minister it deposed when Dr Bavadra’s family and elders refused the cabinet’s reluctant offer.

The state funeral of the former governor general and Vunivalu (paramount chief of Fiji), Ratu Sir George Cakobau, preoccupied the army and the government as the year drew to a close. There were few murmurs of surprise when the interim government’s term was extended another month (to 5 January 1990) in deference to the passing of the Vunivalu. Indeed, some would recognize the move as the familiar political tactic of buying time.

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NEW CALEDONIA

At the beginning of 1989 New Caledonia was more peaceful than it had been for many months. The Matignon