Fiji

For Fiji, 1991 was a year of continuing political turbulence and economic uncertainty. The country weathered several actual and threatened industrial strikes, and witnessed the emergence of a number of political parties in anticipation of the general elections scheduled for May 1992. The economy faced the full onslaught of the interim regime's deregulation measures, which brought it into confrontation with trade unions and other opposition parties. The year will be remembered as pregnant with many ominous possibilities, and some of them will be manifest in 1992.

On the political front, several important developments took place. The political party backed by the Great Council of Chiefs, the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT), whose formation was approved by the council in June 1990, formalized its constitution and began the highly divisive process of selecting candidates to contest the 37 Fijian communal seats. The SVT, says its constitution, will promote the interests of the taukei, the indigenous Fijians, "in association with other ethnic communities in Fiji," seek to re-establish Fiji's links to the British Crown and with the Commonwealth, and pursue economic policies that promote economic growth and development within an essentially deregulated environment to allow "world market forces to determine prices and production for export and local markets through an efficient and productive private sector enterprise" (SVT constitution, 10). In November 1991, Sitiveni Rabuka was elected to the presidency of the party, winning 9 of the 19 votes cast to Adi Lady Lala Mara's 6 and Ratu William Toganivalu's 4.

The election of a commoner (although an uncommon one) over two high-ranking chiefs to head a chiefs' party provoked much comment. Some Fijian observers raised fundamental questions about the inevitably corrosive impact on the Fijian chiefly system of chiefs participating in the hurly-burly of electoral politics as traditional representatives of their people. Others saw the formation of the SVT as essentially an attempt by the eastern-dominated chiefly establishment to control the political destiny of the taukei, and to maintain the status quo.

One of these was the ever-mercurial Apisai Tora, who at various times in his checkered political career has belonged to the Indo-Fijian-backed National Federation Party, the Alliance, and in 1987 the violence-threatening, stridently anti-Coalition Taukei Movement. "Our firm view," he said "remains that the Bose Levu Vakaturaga [Great Council of Chiefs] should be at the pinnacle of Fijian society, totally removed from the taint of ordinary politicking" (FT, 10 Oct 1991). In July, he launched his own party, the All National Congress (ANC), a move that brought the wrath of the interim regime and cost him his cabinet position in the interim government. With its base in western Fiji, a place with a long history of political dissent against both the colonial state and the postco-
lonial Alliance government, the ANC presented itself as a multiracial party for all the people of Fiji. To no one's surprise, Tora presented himself as a changed person, "a moderate and a democrat," saying that Fiji had to find a home for all its people on the basis of justice and fairness: "The people of Fiji, whether we are Fijians, Indians or Europeans, or whatever, are here and here to stay. There is no place else for us to go" (FT, 7 Aug 1991). In 1987 Tora was among those calling for the emasculation of Indo-Fijians' political rights. He hopes to win a number of seats in western Viti Levu as well as a few ANC-aligned General Voter seats to hold the balance of power in the next parliament.

Several other Fijian splinter parties, such as the Fijian Conservative Party and Sakiasi Butadroka's Fijian Christian Nationalist Party (formerly the Fijian Nationalist Party), hope for a similar outcome. Butadroka's party has changed its name but not its platform. It still demands the political obliteration of the Indo-Fijians and complete Fijian control of the economy, including the return of all fee simple and other lands to indigenous hands. In November, Fijians in western Viti Levu launched their own Fijian Landowners Party, with a pro-western Fijian platform similar to the policies of the Western United Front of the 1980s (Lal, 1983). The emergence of splinter Fijian parties is not altogether surprising, though their impact on the Fijian political scene is not likely to be significant. A diminishing fear of the threat of Indo-Fijian political dominance, a quiet but strong suspicion of the hegemonic ambition of eastern Fijians, and personal political aspirations, mean that political fragmentation will be a continuing feature of taukei political life.

On the Indo-Fijian side, too, there is evidence of political fragmentation. In 1991 a number of parties emerged, essentially fragments of bodies formerly associated with the now-defunct Alliance party. Among them were the Fiji Indian Congress and the Indian Liberal Party. However, these parties are not likely to have any major electoral impact; some may even vanish before election day 1992. Although dormant since the coups of 1987, the National Federation Party (NFP) remains the dominant, representative voice of the Indo-Fijian community. The combination of a racially discriminatory constitution that gives Indo-Fijians (nearly half the total population) only 27 of the 71 seats, various pro-Fijian policies of the interim regime, and a general sense of helplessness has given the party (and its constituency) a sense of cohesiveness that it has rarely enjoyed in the past.

In September 1991, the NFP decided to participate in the forthcoming elections under protest. The decision was taken to prevent the Indo-Fijian seats from being occupied by "irresponsible people," in Jai Ram Reddy's words (FT, 21 Sept 1991). There was also the realization that, whatever the NFP's attitudes, many Indo-Fijians would contest the seats for reasons of their own, including settling old scores. Boycotting the elections, the party leaders apprehended, would be disastrous for their community's broader interests and severely detrimental to the party's future survival.
Although the decision to participate may have pleased many disenchanted Indo-Fijians, it deeply dismayed the NFP’s coalition partner, the Fiji Labour Party (FLP), which had resolved earlier to boycott the elections. How could the party contest elections under a constitution it had proclaimed to the world to be racist, feudalistic, authoritarian, and unjust? Participation in the elections, argued the FLP leaders, would give legitimacy to the constitution and amount to its acceptance. But principled resolve eventually gave way to practical realities. Fearing political marginalization and urged by their supporters, the FLP’s indigenous Fijian strategists effectively jettisoned their previous position and began to explore ways of forging a common ground with other independents and like-minded parties to oppose the SVT (Daily Post, 29 Oct 1991). As the year drew to a close, several FLP Fijians were preparing to stand as independents. The difference of opinion between the FLP and the NFP, on contesting the election, ended the coalition arrangement between them.

The fluctuating fortunes of Sitiveni Rabuka frequently made the headlines in 1991. The news that shook Fiji in June 1991 was Rabuka’s stinging criticism of the interim government, which, the general said, had lost touch with the people, “got it all wrong,” and ought to resign. “This government is a reactionary government,” Rabuka said, “made up of overpaid people who sit on their laurels and wait for something to happen before they react” (FT, 5 June 1991). He even threatened to “repossess power” he had invested in the president. Two days later, however, Rabuka backed down when Ganilau, who is also Rabuka’s paramount chief, said he was “extremely disappointed, dismayed and shocked” by the general’s utterances and demanded an unconditional apology from him; this was offered to both Ganilau and Mara and his cabinet colleagues. According to confidential sources within the interim government, Rabuka had planned to sack the government and replace it with a “national front” administration, but the move failed when senior officers of the army balked. Doing an incredible about-turn a month later, Rabuka accepted Mara’s invitation to join the cabinet as co-deputy prime minister and minister for home affairs (which oversees the army, police, and security forces). Mara had outmaneuvered the erratic general, or so it seemed for a while.

While in the administration, however, Rabuka continued to be an irritant to his cabinet colleagues. He made no secret of his desire to become prime minister “to fulfil my objectives and my promises of 1987” (PIM, Aug 1991). Projecting himself as a populist consensus maker, Rabuka helped to resolve the sugar dispute. He angered many chiefs by insisting, as the Coalition had done in 1987, that they should not mix their traditional political roles. His distinction between “meritorious” chiefs and “traditional” chiefs displeased many, especially his remark that the dominance of Fijian chiefs would end soon with “replacement of traditional aristocracy with meritocracy” (FT, 29 Aug 1991). In November, Rabuka was elected to the presidency of the SVT, providing Mara with the opportunity to force his resignation from Cabinet.
Rabuka insists that he considers himself the front-runner for prime minister, but most people in Fiji think (and hope) that the post should go to Josefata Kamikamica, the clean technocrat widely credited with improving the performance of the Fijian economy.

Rabuka’s changing fortune is not difficult to explain. His professed lack of interest in politics, as expressed in 1987, has been overtaken by his ambition to become prime minister or at least play a prominent role in national politics for about fifteen years. This explains why he embraced populist positions to widen his appeal and power base. But such activities displeased others, like Mara, who had hoped that after executing the coups, Rabuka would disappear from center stage and leave the chiefs of the old Alliance party to run the government. Rabuka refused, seeing himself, again like Mara, as being indispensable to the destiny of his people. Tension between the two men, who are alike in both their autocratic temperament and their highly developed sense of personal mana, will continue to make waves in Fijian politics.

On the economic front, the interim regime continued its multipronged effort to resuscitate the economy severely battered by the coups and in 1991 growing at the sluggish rate of 1.5 percent instead of the projected 3.4 percent (SSD, 25 Oct 1991). It continued to court investment from Asian countries to break the monopoly of Australia and New Zealand. Pakistan’s Habib Bank opened in March 1991, and a Korean company bought 1200 hectares of fee simple land in Vanua Levu to establish a pineapple farming and canning factory, hoping to produce 15 million pineapples for export in 1994. Malaysia’s Borneo Finance Group began a joint venture with the government-owned National Bank of Fiji in April. In July, the Fiji National Petroleum Company (Finpeco) gave Malaysia the sole right to distribute petroleum products in Fiji, even though independent assessments show this last move especially to be expensive.

At the same time, the regime continued its program of deregulating the economy. The tax-free-zone scheme, which gives significant tax and other concessions to companies that export 90 percent of their produce, continued. In July, 313 companies representing an investment of $102 million, operated in Fiji under the scheme, while another 114 proposals were approved (PR, 21 Aug 1991). Plans were also approved to extend the tax-free base beyond the garment industry to include timber processing and light manufacture of technical equipment. There is no doubt that the scheme has been a significant shot in the ailing economy’s arm, providing employment and improving the balance of payments. Yet, independent research confirms increasing poverty among lower-income families in Fiji (Barr, 1990).

In related economic changes, the interim regime proposed to introduce a 10 percent value-added tax on all major goods and services, a move its critics say will increase the cost of most major items by 6 to 8 percent and which the government says will reduce the marginal tax rate from 40 percent to 35 percent and abolish the basic tax. The value-added tax will come into effect in 1992.
The interim administration tended to see all industrial problems as being caused by a hostile trade union movement bent on embarrassing it at every opportunity. As a result in May at the national economic summit held in Suva, the regime proposed (and later enacted) a number of far-reaching controls on the operation of trade unions in the country. The changes include the removal of immunity from prosecution of trade unions in cases of damages arising from “unlawful” trade disputes; the introduction of company-based unions; the prohibition of industrial associations from acting as trade unions; the use of postal or workplace ballots for election of union officials (as opposed to election at annual meetings); the amendment of the Trade Disputes Act to widen the definition of a strike to include other forms of industrial action such as go-slow, work-to-rule, and withdrawal of goodwill; and the abolition of wage councils because “getting more people into jobs is considered a better way of addressing low household income than imposing an arbitrary minimum wage which denies many people access to income” (FT, 3 Nov 1991). The Fiji Trades Union Congress claimed that these policies “appear to be fuelled by a savage intent to constrain and ultimately destroy trade unions,” (FT, 5 Nov 1991) and has vowed to enlist international support, including overseas shipping and airline bans, to have them repealed. As 1991 drew to a close, the stage was set for a bitter confrontation between the trade unions and the interim regime.

Finally, disputes in the sugar industry also dominated the news in Fiji, bringing the country to the brink of a strike in May. The main issue in the dispute was the farmers’ demand for the payment in full of the forecast price of F$43.70 per tonne of sugar. The Fiji Sugar Corporation proposed to pay only F$34.96 per tonne, on the grounds of declining world price for sugar, bad weather, mill breakdowns, and harvest delays (IBP, May 1991). After much pressure, the corporation agreed to pay F$6 more as part of the third and final payment. When the farmers refused to accept this offer and demanded prompt elections for the Sugar Cane Growers Council, through which they could air their grievances, the president promulgated decrees providing for fourteen-year jail sentences and fines up to F$10,000 for anyone who refused to plant, grow, or harvest their crops, or in any way impaired the running of the sugar industry. When the farmers still refused, the president threatened to use the army to harvest cane, a prospect strongly condemned by Rabuka. In the end, however, the farmers’ pressure paid off. The president, with the help of General Rabuka, revoked the decrees, and the farmers lifted their boycott and agreed to participate in an all-industry conference.

Subsequently, the farmers accused the interim regime of reneging on its promises and delaying elections to the Growers Council, and organized a three-day no-harvest strike in November. The tensions remain. The farmers’ anxiety was not relieved by the recommendations of a World Bank report that included a steep increase in lease rentals to bring them into line with world market prices. The recommendations are sure to become a sensitive issue in the 1992 general elections.
In sum, 1991 was a year of declared intentions, pyrrhic victories, and hardening positions on both sides of the political divide in Fiji, sowing seeds of issues and concerns that will come to life in 1992. To paraphrase the words of Herman Melville, 1991 was like a ship on its passage out, not a journey complete.

References


Daily Post. Suva.

FT, Fiji Times. Daily, Suva.


PIM, Pacific Islands Monthly. Suva.

PR, Pacific Report. Fortnightly, Canberra.

SVT, Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei constitution (ms in author’s possession).

SSD, South Sea Digest. Fortnightly, Sydney.

NEW CALEDONIA

In the context of the continuing implementation of policies arising from the Matignon Accord, 1991 represents a year of transition between the creation of the new institutions—particularly the provincial system—and the political reassessment to be accomplished in 1992 by the independentists prior to the negotiation of development contracts for 1993–1997.

The concept of economic redistribution for the territory, which at first had mostly involved the adoption of the provincial system, gradually evolved toward new concepts as the gap that existed between the large infrastructure projects proposed by the provincial governments and the actual expectations and needs of local communities became apparent. Increasingly, decisions regarding development were being taken at the level of municipal governments. A discrepancy exists between the need of many municipalities in the back country and the islands for public facilities and their financial resources. Recognition of this discrepancy led to a proposal to the territorial congress to establish for 1992 an Inter-municipal Readjustment Fund (Fonds Intercommunal de Péréquation) to finance these public facilities. The municipality of Noumea would not be a part of this system, and would instead operate under a State-City contract.

Alain Christnacht, the new high commissioner and central government delegate for New Caledonia, assumed his post in January 1991. He had served as secretary general for the territory from 1980 to 1982, and had been head of Cabinet for the minister for Overseas Territories since July 1988.

In April, the RPCR (Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République, the loyalist party) held its first convention since that of July 1988, immediately after the signing of the Matignon Accord. Jacques Lafleur, reelected RPCR president, described how he