

*Chiefs and Indians:
Elections and Politics
in Contemporary Fiji*

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The Republic of Fiji went to the polls in May 1992, its first election since the military coups of 1987 and the sixth since 1970, when the islands became independent from Great Britain. For many people in Fiji and outside, the elections were welcome, marking as they did the republic's first tentative steps toward restoring parliamentary democracy and international respectability, and replacing rule by decree with rule by constitutional law. The elections were a significant event. Yet, hope mingles eerily with apprehension; the journey back to genuine representative democracy is fraught with difficulties that everyone acknowledges but few know how to resolve.

The elections were held under a constitution rejected by half of the population and severely criticized by the international community for its racially discriminatory, antidemocratic provisions. Indigenous Fijian political solidarity, assiduously promoted since the coups, disintegrated in the face of the election-related tensions within Fijian society. A chief-sponsored political party won 30 of the 37 seats in the 70-seat House of Representatives, and was able to form a government only in coalition with other parties. Sitiveni Rabuka, the reluctant politician, became prime minister after gaining the support of the Fiji Labour Party, which he had overthrown in 1987, and despite the opposition of his predecessor and paramount chief of Lau, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. In a further irony, a constitutional system designed to entrench the interests of Fijian chiefs placed a commoner at the national helm. On the other side of the political divide, the triumphant 1987 coalition of the National Federation Party (NFP) and

the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) disintegrated in the weeks before the elections, split over the best strategy to restore Fiji to genuine parliamentary democracy.

Ironies abound, as do uncertainties about Fiji's immediate political future. Contemporary Fiji politics is precariously poised, pulled in contrary directions by the competing, and perhaps incompatible, aspirations of the country's ethnic groups and social classes. At one end of the political spectrum is the unequivocal call by powerful sections of Fijian society to turn Fijian culture back to its pristine setting and entrench permanent Fijian control of the political process. At the other end is the equally determined effort to turn Fiji away from the politics of communalism and traditionalism toward a political order based on principles of racial equality and justice. The elections did little to heal the wounds in Fiji politics. Hence the tension, the ambivalence.

1987 AND ITS AFTERMATH

To understand the dilemmas of contemporary Fijian politics, we need to recall the major events of the last five or six years. The immediate origins of these dilemmas lie, of course, in the coups of 1987. It is not necessary to revisit the contentious historiography and the conflicting interpretations of the Fiji coups.¹ Whether their root cause was a simple racial conflict between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, or a power play by politicians defeated at the polls is moot. What is important is that the coups' architects attempted to erect a constitutional structure and initiate a program of action designed to ensure the paramountcy of Fijian interests and chiefly leadership, at the expense of the rights and privileges of other Fiji citizens.

That task was easier to proclaim than to accomplish, because of international pressure and internal resistance. Even after Rabuka executed his second coup on 25 September 1987, and declared Fiji a republic on 7 October, respite was not at hand. Beset by an economy on the verge of collapse, internal social unrest, international condemnation, and the political ineptitude of the military-dominated regime, Rabuka relinquished power to his paramount chief and former governor-general, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, installing him as the republic's first president on 5 December 1987. Ganilau in turn invited Ratu Mara to form an interim government, which ruled Fiji from December 1987 to May 1992.

The Mara administration was confronted by an array of problems, two of which required immediate attention. One was resuscitating an economy shattered by reduced investor confidence, the hemorrhaging of skilled personnel from the public sector, the flight of capital, the interruptions in the sugarcane harvest, and the severe downturn in the tourist industry. The other was the restoration of the country to at least a semblance of civilian rule through the promulgation of a constitution that realized the publicly stated aims of the coups while maintaining the symbolic paraphernalia of parliamentary democracy. To these two tasks Mara and his ministers dedicated most of their efforts.

ECONOMIC INITIATIVES

On the economic front, the interim administration initiated policies that promised to chart a radically different path for Fiji's economic future (Elek and Hill 1991; Sturton and McGregor 1991). Led by Finance Minister Josevata Kamikamica, it attempted to develop commercial links with ASEAN countries, in part to lessen traditional dependence on trade with Australia and New Zealand, whose criticism of the coups had angered the Fijian leaders (Sutherland 1989). This effort bore fruit as Japanese, Korean, Malaysian, and Taiwanese companies invested in tourism, agriculture, and other primary production.

The government also began deregulating the economy and eliminating Fiji's import-substitution policies. It started a tax-free zone under which companies exporting 90 percent or more of their products would be granted tax holidays for up to thirteen years and would be exempt from customs duties on imported equipment and production materials (Chandra 1990). By 1991, more than three hundred companies had invested a total of F\$102 million, and another one hundred were approved.² The tax-free base was extended beyond the garment industry, where it had received its initial and greatest success, to include timber processing for furniture and fittings and manufacture of light technical equipment (*PR*, 25 July 1991, 3). Critics have complained about the unequal distribution of income generated by the new industries and about sweatshop conditions (Barr 1990), but the scheme has improved Fiji's balance of payments and provided local employment.

These new economic programs required strict regulation of the labor market and a corresponding reduction in the power of the trade unions,

which were prohibited in the tax-free zones. The trade union movement was the backbone of the Fiji Labour Party and a continuing source of irritation to the government (Slatter 1989). In May 1991, the government enacted a series of repressive labor laws intended to control the trade unions, but officially justified in the name of improving the country's international competitiveness and internal economic flexibility. The new decrees enabled the prosecution of trade unions for damages arising from "unlawful" trade disputes; introduced company-based unions; amended the Trade Disputes Act to include other forms of industrial action such as go-slow, work-to-rule, and the withdrawal of goodwill; provided for the use of postal or workplace ballots for the election of union officials; and abolished minimum-wage councils. In retaliation, the Fiji Trades Union Congress, with twenty-five trade unions and 45 percent of Fiji's full-time workers among its members, threatened a massive strike, which was averted when the government retracted the decrees (*IB*, June 1991).

The scene was also set for confrontation in the sugar industry. Dispute there centered on two issues. One was the farmers' demand for a full forecast price for cane of F\$43.70 per ton, and not the F\$34.96 offered by the Fiji Sugar Corporation, a reduction it justified in the name of the falling international price, bad weather, increased costs of production, and harvest delays (*PR*, 30 May 1991). The other was the farmers' demand for prompt elections, postponed since 1987, for the Sugar Cane Growers' Council. When their demands were refused, the farmers threatened a strike, whereupon the government passed decrees declaring the sugar industry an essential service and proposed fourteen-year jail sentences and fines up to F\$14,000 for anyone interrupting the running of the industry (*RFG*, 1991). Once again the government backed down when faced with further industrial action by the farmers. Nonetheless, the imminent confrontation between the two sowed the seeds of bitterness and distrust that would resurface later in the political arena.

One beneficiary of the disputes in the sugar industry was the National Farmers' Union, formed in the 1980s, the brainchild of the trade unionist Mahendra Chaudhary, finance minister in the short-lived Bavadra government. The union's success helped to undermine the influence of its much older rivals, the Kisan Sangh and the Federation of Cane Growers. When elections were held for the Sugar Cane Growers' Council early in 1992, the National Farmers' Union won a majority of the seats. It became, in effect,

the Fiji Labour Party's rural arm and the main reason for Labour's electoral victory in the cane belts in the 1992 elections. Chaudhary, too, gained in stature (or notoriety) (*IB*, June 1991). The National Farmers' Union had enabled him to extend his power beyond his urban trade union base, and he used his new connections to great political advantage (*IB*, July 1991).

Another unexpected winner from the postcoup industrial tremors was Sitiveni Rabuka, who distanced himself from the interim administration's policies to create a niche for himself as a moderate consensus builder. In the nurses' strike and the long-festered Vatukoula gold mine strike, for example, he sympathized with the strikers. He went further. In June 1991, he said that Mara's administration "had got their industrial policies wrong and ought to resign. . . . This government is a reactionary government," said Rabuka, "made up of overpaid people who sit on their laurels and wait for something to happen before they react" (*FT*, 8 June 1991). He even threatened to "repossess" the power he had vested in the president. A few days later he apologized to the government for his blistering criticism, and for "insulting" his paramount chiefs. Even more incredibly, he joined Mara's cabinet as deputy prime minister. One interpretation of this development was that he had been coopted, and thus marginalized, by Mara. Nonetheless, Rabuka had signaled his independence. This, together with the government's confrontational industrial policies, was an important reason why, after the 1992 elections, he was able to get Labour's support in his bid to become prime minister.

THE CONSTITUTION

Several attempts in the immediate aftermath of the coups to produce a broadly acceptable constitution had failed (Lal 1992*b*, 321). Then, in October 1988, the interim administration appointed the Constitution Inquiry and Advisory Committee to produce a constitution "having regard in particular to the failure of the 1970 constitution to provide adequate and full protection of the rights, interests and concerns of the indigenous Fijian people, and having regard to all the circumstances prevailing in Fiji" (FCIAC 1989). The loaded terms of reference—how was it determined that the 1970 constitution had failed and by whom?—need little comment. The coup leaders were described by the committee as "members of the security

forces who assisted in the change of government in 1987." The committee presented its report early in 1990 and a new constitution was promulgated by the president in July of that year.

The new constitution provides for an executive presidency and a bicameral legislature consisting of an appointed upper house, the Senate, and an elected lower house, the House of Representatives. The president, always to be a Fijian chief, is to be appointed by the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* or Great Council of Chiefs and responsible to that body alone in the exercise of the powers of office. These are considerable, including appointing the prime minister (again always to be a Fijian) and members of the president's advisory council, and presiding over other important functions of the state.

The Senate consists of 34 appointed members, 24 nominated by the Council of Chiefs and the remaining 10 by the president. The council's senators retain the power of veto over all legislation that impinges on Fijian interests, including land and traditional customs. Given their strength in the Senate, they can, if they wish, frustrate the legislative efforts of any government, even one dominated by Fijians. In effect, the chiefs and their nominees in the Senate enjoy untrammelled powers to control the legislative agenda.

The elected House of Representatives consists of 70 members, of whom 37 are indigenous Fijians, 27 are Indo-Fijians, and 10 are "Others." Here, the new constitution differs from the old one, which had established parity between the two major ethnic groups, now roughly equal in numbers. In another major change, all the members are to be elected on purely racial rolls, with Fijians voting only for Fijians, Indo-Fijians only for Indo-Fijians, and Others (Chinese, Europeans and Part-Europeans, Pacific Islanders) voting only for their ethnic candidates. (The 1970 constitution provided for half the parliamentary seats to be elected from multiracial constituencies). The racially based rolls leave little opportunity or incentive for multiracial politics, and they discourage the adoption of more broadly based political platforms that transcend racial and parochial concerns. There is no practical advantage in a multiracial philosophy, as was painfully evident in the 1992 elections.

Of the 37 Fijian seats, 32 are elected from the rural constituencies and the remaining 5 from urban ones. The allocation of seats became an issue. Why, argued many, should the province of Ba, for instance, with more than 55,000 ethnic Fijians, have the same number of seats, three, as Lau

with a population of 14,000? Why should Rewa, with 48,000 Fijians, get two seats while Cakaudrove, with 29,000, gets three? Why indeed? And why should urban Fijians, who make up more than one-third of the Fijian population, have only five seats? The main reason for this gross malapportionment was to reduce the voting strength of the urban Fijians whose support, however small, for the Labour Party had contributed to its 1987 victory. It is also part of the larger effort to preserve the Fijian status quo.

The constitution thus became a major issue before and during the elections. Most Fijians appeared to support it and to welcome the dominant voice it gave them, though many from western Viti Levu questioned their electoral underrepresentation and the rejection of their claim for a separate confederacy, the *Yasayasa Vaka Ra*, to complement the existing three (the *Tovata*, the *Burebasaga*, and the *Kubuna*) and give them a national voice commensurate with their numbers and contribution to the national economy.³ In a submission to the Constitution Inquiry and Advisory Committee, a twelve-member delegation of western Fijians criticized the constitution for discriminating “against the progressively productive, better educated, forward thinking Fiji citizens of all races in favour of that minority segment of the community that represents (and seeks to reserve for itself) the aristocratic, undemocratic, privileged pattern of colonial life” (Sutherland 1992, 190). Their protests went unheeded, but were voiced again in the elections. The Coalition (of the National Federation Party and the Fiji Labour Party) rejected the constitution too, denouncing it as racist, feudalistic, undemocratic, and authoritarian, and promised an international campaign to overthrow it. The difference of opinion within the coalition on how best to achieve this goal led to its collapse.

PREPARING FOR THE ELECTIONS

Conflict in the Fijian Camp

With the constitution formally promulgated in July 1990, the Council of Chiefs launched a new political party that it hoped would unite the Fijian people under one umbrella, in the manner of the Fijian Administration of colonial days. Thus united, the chiefs hoped, the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT, or Fijian Political Party) would lead the Fijian people to electoral victory and fulfil the aims of the coup. The reality turned out to be different. Even as the party was being launched, some Fijian leaders questioned the wisdom of the Council of Chiefs, as a formal nonpolitical

body, sponsoring a political party. One critic was Apisai Tora, who wanted the chiefs to remain above the fray of ordinary politicking. What would happen to the dignity of the council if it failed to capture all the Fijian seats? "Our firm view," he said, "remains that the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* should be at the pinnacle of Fijian society, totally removed from the taint of ordinary politicking" (*FT*, 10 Oct 1991)

Such views went unheeded, paving the way for further problems. The first of these emerged over the election of the president of the Fijian Political Party. Many Fijians wanted a nonpolitical chief, chosen through consensus, to lead the party and provide it with a semblance of impartial traditional authority. Once again, the reality turned out to be different. There were three contenders for the presidency: Ratu William Toganivalu, a high chief of Bau; Lady Lala Mara, the paramount chief of Burebasaga and Ratu Mara's wife; and Sitiveni Rabuka. To the surprise of many and the consternation of others, Rabuka defeated the chiefs, winning 9 of the 19 ballots of the Management Committee of the Fijian Political Party, while Lala Mara got 6 votes and Toganivalu 4.⁴ This stunning result intrigued many Fijians, including the Fijian Nationalist Party leader Sakiasi Butadroka, who remarked: "If the svT delegates can put a commoner before a chief, then I don't understand why the Great Council of Chiefs is backing the svT. . . . I don't know why a chiefs-backed party can do such a thing," he said, "putting a chief—in this case the highest ranking chief, Ro Lady Lala—before a selection panel" (*FT*, 4 Nov 1991).

Rabuka's ascendancy troubled many Fijians, including some of his former (but now disenchanted) supporters, who had expected him to fade away after the coup. Among the reasons for their disenchantment were his mercurial character and bursts of sharp criticism of Mara's administration. His aggressive pursuit of political power disturbed them, as Rabuka made no secret of his ambition to become prime minister. He demanded complete loyalty from his colleagues and saw his election to the presidency of the Fijian Political Party as bringing him a step closer to the top job (*FT*, 1 Nov 1991). Other aspirants disagreed, citing the constitutional provision that the appointment of prime minister was the prerogative of the president, to be exercised in independent deliberate judgment.

As he maneuvered for the prime ministership, Rabuka began to develop ideological justifications for his ambitions. Although still proclaiming himself a loyal commoner, he wondered whether it was appropriate for chiefs to involve themselves in the cut and thrust of electoral politics.

Their proper role was at the local village level, because “when it comes to politics, the chiefs do not have the mandate of the people” (*Age*, 17 Aug 1991). To underscore his point, he stressed that “there are a lot of capable commoners who can play a very, very important role in the Fiji of the next decade” (*IB*, July 1991, 25). Implicitly, he counted himself among them.

He also noted that “the dominance of customary chiefs in government is coming to an end” and soon “aristocracy” would be replaced by “meritocracy” (*FT*, 29 Aug 1991). None too subtly, he was invoking the “Melanesian” model of achieved leadership against the “Polynesian” model of ascribed leadership. He compared his paramount chiefs—he had Mara in mind—to the towering banyan tree “where you don’t see anything growing,” and suggested that they should step aside (*PIM*, Aug 1991). No one was indispensable, he said. “Those defeated in elections should take it in their political stride, accept defeat and move out gracefully” (*FT*, 1 Nov 1991).

Ratu Mara, the target of Rabuka’s barb, was among those disturbed by Rabuka’s strident ascendancy. He thought Rabuka an “angry young man,” a naive soldier, erratic, “speaking off the cuff in any instigation,” and implicitly unworthy to be his successor (*MT*, Nov 1991). The Fijian Political Party under Rabuka’s leadership was a “debacle,” “an organization in disarray,” Mara reportedly told his political intimates (*WPR*, Mar 1992, 5). Rabuka retaliated, calling Mara a “ruthless politician who has been allowed to get away with a lot. Maybe it’s because of the Fijian culture that he is a big chief and because he was groomed well by the colonial government” (*DP*, 11 Dec 1991). Early in 1992, Mara encouraged the formation of an informal “Diners’ Club” in which he shared his experiences with a select number of prominent and aspiring Fijian leaders. Rabuka was not among them. Mara went further and backed Josefata Kamikamica as his preferred successor. The rupture between Mara and Rabuka was complete, yet they are more alike in autocratic temperament and well-developed sense of personal destiny than they care to acknowledge.

Tensions within the Fijian Political Party erupted openly with the selection of candidates for the 1992 elections. In province after province aspiring candidates questioned the selection procedures, threatened to stand as independents, and sometimes formed their own parties even as they pledged their loyalty to the chiefs. In Macuata, the situation had so deteriorated that it required the president’s personal intervention. Here, first ballot choices had to be discarded to accommodate rebellious would-

be independents. One of the stranger ironies of the selection process was that some of the most ardent supporters of the coup missed out altogether.⁵ Many of them became bitter critics of Rabuka.

Rabuka also had to contend with new Fijian political parties that challenged the authority and legitimacy of the Fijian Political Party. There was Sakiasi Butadroka's Fijian Nationalist Party, in 1991 revamped and renamed the Fijian Christian Nationalist Party. Characteristically anti-Indian, Butadroka also called for more balanced development in the Fiji provinces; decentralization of the Ministry of Fijian Affairs; reversion of all fee-simple and Crown lands to their native owners; complete Fijian ownership of all rents from the exploitation of mineral and natural resources; reactivation of traditional, rural administrative structures; support for a fourth confederacy and the rotation of the presidency among all of them; and an all-Fijian parliament within ten years, in recognition of the Fijian people's "full authority and absolute power."⁶ In April 1992, Butadroka joined forces with Ratu Osea Gavidi's newly formed, Nadroga-based, *Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua* (STV, Party of the People of the Land), which was essentially a revival of the long-dormant Western United Front.

This coalition's rival for support among Fijians outside the Fijian Political Party generally (and in western Viti Levu in particular), was Apisai Tora's All Nationals Congress launched on 22 June 1991. Tora, the cigar-chomping, once self-styled Fidel Castro of the Pacific, militant trade unionist of the 1960s turned ethnic chauvinist of the 1980s, is the quintessential survivor of Fiji politics. Once a leader of the Indian-based National Federation Party, he joined the Alliance Party in the late 1970s and was rewarded with a cabinet portfolio. After the Labour Coalition's victory in 1987, he helped found the Taukei Movement, and was a member of the various postcoup cabinets until forced out by Mara when he, Tora, founded the All Nationals Congress.

This party presented itself as a moderate, multiracial successor to the defunct Alliance Party, which had ruled Fiji for nearly two decades.⁷ It committed itself to rethinking the interim administration's social, economic, and industrial policies, promoting regional development to favor economically depressed provinces, reviewing such statutory organizations as the Native Lands Trust Board and, most importantly, the constitution. The anti-eastern Fijian sentiment was there, too, as Tora made "no secret

of his desire to end the political dominance of eastern Fijians, as represented by Ratu Mara and Ganilau" (*IB*, Oct 1991, 37). Tora remained a steadfast advocate of the fourth confederacy, and presented himself as a progressive, an agent of change (*PIM*, July 1991). Tora, Butadroka, and leaders of a few ephemeral parties that disappeared just as soon as they were launched came from different ideological backgrounds and had diverse political agendas. What they all shared was an unmistakable hostility toward the hegemony of eastern Fijians and toward the Fijian Political Party, which they saw as Mara's instrument.

On the eve of the election the Fijians seemed less united than ever before. Rabuka's leadership of the Fijian Political Party and his prime ministerial aspirations were contested. Triumphant postcoup Fijian nationalism was in danger of derailment. The removal of the perceived threat of Indian dominance that had distorted political discourse in Fiji for so long had allowed further discussion of internal Fijian issues that had long remained hidden from the non-Fijian public. As one *Fiji Times* editorial put it, "The Fijians are now facing so many issues that challenge the very fabric of traditional and customary life. Things they thought were sacred have become political topics, publicly debated, scrutinised and ridiculed." Now, the editorial continued, "the threat is coming from within their own communities where the politics of numbers are changing loyalties and alliances. For the first time in modern history, the Fijian community is in danger of fragmentation; democracy is taking its toll. The chiefs are losing their mana and politicians enjoy increasing influence" (*FT*, 21 Mar 1992).

Coalition in Disarray

Fortunately for Rabuka and others in the Fijian camp, things were little better on the Coalition side, where internal divisions and differences over strategy proved even more irreconcilable and destructive. The coalition between the National Federation Party and the Fiji Labour Party had fallen on hard times. It had become a moribund marriage of convenience marooned in the shallows. Its unity, evident following the coups, had become embroiled in personal leadership ambitions, following the death of Timoci Bavadra in 1989, and in deep differences over strategy. The Coalition had denounced the new constitution vehemently, but the partners disagreed over how best to work for its repeal. Should they partici-

pate in the elections and initiate a dialogue with the new government in parliament, or should they boycott the elections and rely on international pressure to effect the necessary changes?

The National Federation Party, led by its former parliamentary leader Jai Ram Reddy, decided in late July 1991 against the boycott option, choosing to participate in the elections under protest. Several considerations informed this decision. The party leaders realized that international pressure, in which the Fiji Labour Party placed much store, would be to no avail, and that in the end the Indo-Fijian leaders would have to deal with the elected representatives of the Fijian people. Only if the Fijian leaders rejected dialogue and refused to consider issues of concern to them would the National Federation Party use the boycott weapon. Participation in the election did not mean acceptance of the constitution. "If you get elected and do nothing, then you are accepting it," said Reddy. "If at every single opportunity, you raise your voice, and if need be, walk out of the House: that is not accepting the constitution" (*FT*, 21 Aug 1991).

The NFP leaders also realized that boycott would fail as many Indo-Fijians would stand for election anyway, and present themselves as leaders of their people. Indeed, small anti-Coalition, pro-election Indo-Fijian political parties had already begun to emerge, among them the Fiji Indian Congress and the Fiji Indian Liberal Party. Participation under protest was consistent with the National Federation Party's past history. In 1965, for instance, it had been unhappy with the outcome of the London constitutional conference, which favored Europeans and Fijians, but had worked under the new constitution for two years before staging a boycott in 1967 and precipitating a by-election a year later (Lal 1992b, 200–204). The NFP leaders also heeded the advice of leaders overseas that the boycott option should be the last resort (*DP*, 19 May 1992). As for the FLP leaders, Reddy said: "They are by nature negative and their language is boycott, strike, disrupt, destroy and wreck. They want to destroy everything in sight" (*DP*, 11 May 1992).

The Fiji Labour Party disagreed. How could it participate in an election under a constitution it had roundly condemned as racist, authoritarian, undemocratic, and feudalistic? To do so would accord legitimacy to that flawed document and undermine the party's credibility internationally. The Fiji Labour Party told visiting Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans in February 1992: "We do not wish to be a party to an election that will not return Fiji to genuine democracy but instead entrench an authori-

tarian racist government similar to that of South Africa" (FLP, 4 Feb 1992). International pressure, the party believed, would force the government into a dialogue on the constitution. Said Navin Maharaj, its secretary general, "Nothing can be done by going into parliament and success can only come through international pressure, and that is what we intend to do" (DP, 27 April 1992). "Rabuka has explicitly told us that the Constitution cannot be changed and likewise the *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* has not given any assurance of any change," said Mahendra Chaudhary. "Do you think the coup-plotters carried out so much atrocities for the last five years just to change the constitution?" (DP, 11 May 1992).

That was the Fiji Labour Party's public stance. In private, however, it was pursuing other options. While it would formally maintain its boycott stance, the party encouraged its indigenous Fijian members to forge a broad coalition with parties outside the Fijian Political Party, including the Fijian Nationalist Party and the All Nationals Congress, and even to contest election as independents. Such a move was, in fact, made in October 1991, and a thirty-eight-point joint platform prepared. Among other items, it included the promotion of indigenous Fijian aspirations in accordance with international conventions; the creation of a fourth Fijian confederacy; the introduction of a national leadership code of conduct; the preservation "of the dignity and integrity and independence of the Bose Levu Vakaturaga so that it is not manipulated to support the type of politics that diminishes people's respect for the chiefs"; condemnation of the antiurban bias of the constitution; and an urgent review of the constitution to make it "consistent with democratic principles, United Nations human rights conventions and Commonwealth statements of principles and thus enable Fiji to apply for membership of the commonwealth as soon as possible."⁸

At first the prospects looked promising, but they fell apart when Butadroka had second thoughts about what the proposals would do to his own credibility. "If there is any work done with the FLP, our image as a deeply rooted Fijian party will be tarnished," he said. "Either you come in as independent candidates on our party ticket or we stand as adversaries in the election." Koresi Matatolu, the All Nationals Congress general secretary, laid down other preconditions. His party would join, he said, if Butadroka retracted his call to deport Indians from Fiji and if the Fiji Labour Party recognized the constitution. Talk of solidarity remained just talk.

The FLP leaders had also been seeking to merge the Fiji Labour Party and the National Federation Party into a single party (*FT*, 18 Aug 1991). Labour reminded the National Federation Party of its apparent commitment to a merger in the late 1980s, which the party disavowed. It rejected the merger option, too, in the interest of political survival. The coalition arrangement had worked well, said Reddy, and should continue. "We can speak out without treading on each other's toes. In a merged party, I would be very unhappy if the party agreed to nationalisation. Then, we would project an image of division." He went further: "I am more and more intrigued, as time progresses, about the real motive behind this move. Is it unity or is it because the NFP has become too much of a nuisance for the Labour Party?" (*FT*, 21 Aug 1991).

Reddy and other NFP leaders were not the only ones opposed to the merger. Vocal opposition came also from some leading Fijian members of the Fiji Labour Party, among them Simione Durutalo, its founding vice president. He called the merger proposal a strategic mistake that would "lock everybody back into pre-1987 voting patterns with people voting on racial lines rather than for parties," by once again raising the specter of Indo-Fijian domination (*FT*, 16 Aug 1991). He went on that it would be far better for the Fiji Labour Party to prepare its groundwork and position itself for victory in the 1996 elections than attempt to win through a merger in 1992: "Then, if the military comes in, we will have the people's support." The only way forward in Fiji politics, he said, was to "democratise Fijian society." "The Fiji Labour Party is the only political party able to create an inter-ethnic alliance that can simultaneously champion the Indo-Fijian interests for long-term political security as well as indigenous Fijian commoners' interests and aspirations for long-term economic security" (*FT*, 16 Aug 1991). Durutalo and others became disenchanted with the Fiji Labour Party when its leaders ignored their advice and refused to reconsider the party's boycott strategy. On the eve of the elections, some of them left the party or began to forge links with other Fijian parties.

In a last, almost desperate, attempt to maintain a façade of unity and to prevent a splitting of the Indo-Fijian community, the Fiji Labour Party offered not to disrupt the National Federation Party's election plans if it obtained the government's assurance to immediately address all issues of concern to the Coalition (foremost among them a review of the constitution). Without such assurance, the National Federation Party would boy-

cott parliament. But if the government agreed to its demands, it would enter parliament and participate in deliberations “only to the extent of giving effect to redressing those grievances.” Furthermore, the National Federation Party would “consult with and obtain the agreement of FLP at all stages of the negotiation” (FLP, 30 Apr 1992).

It was a fantastic demand, which the National Federation Party could not accept “without sacrificing for all time NFP’s reputation and integrity.” One NFP leader likened the ultimatum to the extortionate demands of a tyrannical landlord. Perhaps the Fiji Labour Party did not really expect the National Federation Party to accept its conditions. Perhaps it wanted to use rejection as an excuse to participate in the elections, for by early 1992 the boycott option had become untenable and was being severely criticized throughout Fiji. Even its respected international advisers were of that mind. Among them was Professor Yash Ghai, who wrote:

It is possible to attack a Constitution and yet take part in the elections. But it is absolutely essential that the terms on which it [the party] takes part is made clear so that it [taking part] is not interpreted as an endorsement of the constitution. A party may wish to take part in the elections with a view to changing the constitution, or making the political system under it difficult to operate, or not letting its rivals dominate parliament and government. So while there may be a strong moral case for a boycott, it may occasionally make sense to take part in elections while simultaneously attacking the constitution. The really important question was not to boycott, but whether to endorse the constitution. (FT, 7 May 1992)

Unable to coerce the National Federation Party into acquiescence, with its own house in disarray, public opinion heavily in favor of participating in the elections, and facing marginalization because of the NFP’s election decision, the Fiji Labour Party acknowledged the inevitable and late in April announced its decision to participate. By any measure, this was a stunning *volte face*. How did the Fiji Labour Party explain its new position? Said Navin Maharaj: “It was only a change in strategy: from boycott of the election to boycott of parliament.” Why? “The change came about because the NFP has no clear picture” (DP, 11 May 1992). Its flip-flop left its supporters dismayed and uncertain. Amid acrimony and vacillation, the coalition had collapsed.

The one major political party that was not as consumed by bitter internal divisions as the Fijian Political Party or the FLP-NFP Coalition was the

General Voters Party (GVP). It was in some ways a resurrection of the pre-coup General Electors Association, which was a small but influential spoke in the Alliance Party wheel. The only difference now was that the General electorate had been widened to include not only Part-Europeans, Chinese, and people of mixed ancestry, but also other Fiji citizens of Pacific Islands ancestry who, prior to the coup, were registered on the Fijian roll (Solomon Islanders, Samoans, Tongans). Like the other ethnically based parties, the General Voters Party's concerns were parochial, focusing on the interests and aspirations of its own community. It proclaimed itself in favor of "a system of democracy which incorporates the principle of guaranteed representation of major ethnic groups" in parliament, and opposed to "any attempt to weaken or remove a legally-established right to the existing ownership of land, whether native or freehold."⁹ Large portions of freehold land in Fiji are owned by Europeans, and the five General Voters Party seats in parliament are grossly out of proportion to their numbers.

THE CAMPAIGN

The campaign itself was much more subdued than all the previous ones. The interim administration's decree making libel a criminal offense punishable by up to two years imprisonment and a F\$1300 fine, together with the memory of the harassment of journalists since the coups, deterred the media from searching scrutiny of the election platforms and personalities. The racially segregated electoral system encouraged candidates to confine themselves to issues of particular concern to their ethnic communities or, in the case of the Fijians, their provinces and regions. National, nonracial issues were present in the election platforms and in the campaign rhetoric, but were not given serious consideration.

Reddy of the National Federation Party, for example, talked of a government of national unity "based on a formula of power-sharing which would ensure that every community is represented at the decision making level" (*DP*, 9 May 1992), but his proposal was ridiculed by the Labour Party, which said that such an arrangement would "both implicitly and explicitly give credence and legitimacy to the decreed constitution," and reduce the National Federation Party to a "subservient position . . . depending on the mercy of the Fijian side in parliament" (*FLP*, 11 May 1992). Ratu Mara and Ratu William Toganivalu attempted to distance

themselves from the constitution they had generated, much to the annoyance of Rabuka and his allies. But for the most part such issues remained in the background. Instead, internal fighting in both camps dominated the news on the hustings.

In the Fijian Political Party, the main question centered on who would be prime minister, Sitiveni Rabuka or Josevata Kamikamica. Sometimes the campaigns on behalf of the two men became unpleasant, even vicious. As was his wont, Rabuka changed his tune often, depending on his audience. To the fundamentalist members of the Methodist Church, he renewed his call to declare Fiji a Christian state and reimpose the Sabbath decree; from his militant nationalist supporters, he demanded complete loyalty and promised action, if needed, "in order to complete what they started"; to the media and to his opponents, he was the very essence of good sense and moderation, talking of national reconciliation and dialogue. (What happened to the Pacific way? he asked—without irony, so far as one could tell [TR, May 1992]). For his part, Kamikamica, who was outwardly confident of his chances, highlighted his administrative experience, distanced himself from the extreme rhetoric of his more nationalist-minded compatriots, and promised to work toward genuine multi-racialism.

In the former Coalition camp, the exchanges were equally pointed and unpleasant as leaders exhumed and ridiculed each other's record of public service since the coups and personal commitments to Fiji—many of them have visas for permanent residence overseas—and traded insults, accusing each other of opportunism, arrogance, and treachery. The vehemence of the attacks was especially surprising in view of the virtually identical platforms of the two political parties. The republic's first election campaign produced more heat than light, as the confused electorate pondered their limited choices.

Polling lasted a week, from 23 May to 30 June. In the Fijian constituencies, the Fijian Political Party won 30 of the 37 Fijian seats, the Fijian Nationalist Party 3, the *Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua* 2, and independents 2. The Fijian Political Party won 66.6 percent of all the Fijian votes cast (112,447), the Fijian Nationalist Party 12.8 percent, the All Nationals Congress 8.7 percent, the Fiji Labour Party 1.2 percent, the *Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua* 4.6 percent, and the independents 6.2 percent. The Fijian voter turnout averaged 78 percent. A further breakdown of these figures reveals noteworthy trends. The Fijian Political Party achieved its greatest

triumph in the small eastern constituencies of the Koro Sea, getting 89.1 percent of all votes cast (27,658). Its better organization there, and the undivided support of the provincial councils, accounted for its spectacular success. In the urban constituencies, too, the party did relatively well, capturing 74.7 percent of all the rural votes (32,252). Again a more effective campaign organization and an attractive slate of candidates helped this party.

In the rural constituencies generally, however, the Fijian Political Party did less well, winning only 63.3 percent of all the rural votes (80,195). In rural Viti Levu, it won only 49.7 percent of the total Fijian votes (52,538), the main reason for its modest showing there being the challenge of the other Fijian parties, especially the Fijian Nationalist Party and the *Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua*, which together won 26.5 percent of all the Fijian votes. Butadroka, the Fijian Nationalist Party leader, was a known personality and a charismatic campaigner. His grassroots style of campaigning, and his uncomplicated political message laced with earthy humor, won him support, as it had done in previous elections. His running mate, Ratu Mosese Tuisawau, was a high chief of the Rewa province, who appealed powerfully to the Rewans' sense of pride and demanded a greater Rewan voice in national Fijian affairs. One of the Fijian Nationalist Party's proposals was the rotation of the presidency among the four confederacies, with Rewa next in line. Ratu Osea Gavidu and his running mate, Mosese Tuisawau, campaigning under the banner of the Fijian Nationalist Party and the *Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua*, won the 2 Nadroga/Navosa seats, again by focusing on local issues.

The other major party that had threatened to erode support for the Fijian Political Party in Viti Levu was the All Nationals Congress. It did not win any seats, but only narrowly missed out in Ba where it managed to capture 5775 votes; it gained 8384 votes in rural Viti Levu as a whole (10.5 percent of the Fijian votes cast). Why did the All Nationals Congress fail? Tora's own chequered political career was a factor, as was the fear among many Fijians that anything short of a clear victory for the Fijian Political Party could see Fiji facing another round of political upheaval (as Rabuka seemed to hint in his speeches).

Labour's dismal performance in the Fijian constituencies was not surprising. It was underfunded, underprepared, and entered late into the fray, putting up disenchanted candidates, who were merely expected to keep the party flag flying, in only a handful of constituencies. Disunity

among its leaders did not help matters, nor did public criticism of the party's election strategy by some of its leading Fijian members, such as Simone Durutalo. Many Fijians who had joined the party in 1987 had left, including such luminaries as Joeli Kalou and Jo Nacola, both ministers in the Bavadra government, the former contesting the election on the Fijian Political Party ticket and the latter as an independent. On the eve of the election, Labour had come to be regarded among many Fijians as an Indo-Fijian party.

Among the Indo-Fijians, where the voter turnout was 76.7 percent, the results confounded all predictions. The National Federation Party, which had been widely expected to win nearly all the 27 Indo-Fijian seats, won only 14, the remaining 13 going to the Fiji Labour Party. Minor Indo-Fijian parties failed to make any mark. The National Federation Party won 50 percent of the total Indo-Fijian votes cast (114,005) and the Fiji Labour Party 47.6 percent. A breakdown of the figures shows important trends. Labour won most of the seats in the cane belts of Fiji, whereas the National Federation Party, founded as a cane farmers party in the early 1960s, achieved its greatest success in the urban areas, which should have been Labour's domain.

Labour's victory in the cane belt benefited from the success in the Sugar Cane Growers Council of the National Farmers' Union, whose real leader, Mahendra Chaudhary, also led the Fiji Labor Party. In the countryside, Labour and the Farmers' Union were seen as one and the same. The National Federation Party had let the Fiji Labour Party claim public credit for the Coalition's role in resolving the dispute in the sugar industry, which Labour was now portraying as its own, rather than a joint, achievement. The National Federation Party was not helped by being portrayed as a party of the Indo-Fijian bourgeoisie. In urban areas, it was better funded, fielded better candidates, and was able to benefit from bitter divisions within the ranks of the trade unions. Some of Chaudhary's harshest critics, such as trade union leader James Raman, were NFP candidates. Labour's victory was as unexpected as it was sweet. Its sharper message, better organization, strong support among Indo-Fijian voters for whom the National Federation Party's earlier anticolonial struggles were a vague memory, had worked to Labour's advantage, ensuring its important role in the Indo-Fijian community for some time to come. The National Federation Party, on the other hand, is, and sees itself as, essentially a communal party, but the interests of Indo-Fijians are not as homogeneous as they

once appeared to be. Its message is blurred, and its viability as a credible force is unclear.

THE RACE FOR PRIME MINISTER

The race for prime minister started even before results were known, as leading candidates Rabuka and Kamikamica began to campaign for support among the opposition parties. The exact details and sequence of events in the hectic few days following the elections will probably never be fully revealed, but the basic outline is clear. As soon as the final results were announced, the parliamentary board of the Fijian Political Party met, on 31 May, to elect its leader, who would be its candidate for prime minister. At this meeting, Rabuka repeatedly won 18 votes, Kamikamica 2, Filipe Bole 4, and Ratu William Toganivalu 3. With his party's mandate, and with the Fijian Political Party lacking an outright majority to form a government, Rabuka began to explore a coalition with the General Voters Party (which had won all the five General seats), the Fijian Nationalist Party, the *Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua*, and the two independents. Again the details are unclear, though we do know from press statements that the General Voters Party opposed any coalition that included the Fijian Nationalist Party, whose extremist platforms it had denounced during the campaign. The General Voters Party preferred Kamikamica for the top job.

When Rabuka went to Government House on 1 June to be sworn in, claiming the support of forty-two members of the House behind him, President Ganilau told him to produce the signatures of all those who supported him before 10 AM the next day. The president, thought to be leaning in Kamikamica's direction, was aware of the split in the Fijian Political Party over the leadership and was mindful of Mara's preference. Equally, he was mindful of the constitutional requirement to appoint as prime minister the Fijian best able to command the majority support of all members in the House of Representatives, including the twenty-seven Indo-Fijian members.

Obtaining the signatures was not as easy as Rabuka might have supposed, for by the time he returned from Government House, new tensions had arisen. Some Fijian members who had supported him initially opposed any formal association with the Fijian Nationalist Party and threatened to throw their weight behind his opponent. The situation was

also complicated by the National Federation Party's public support for Kamikamica. Reddy had told Rabuka's emissaries that he could not support the major general, whom he did not and could not trust. He considered Kamikamica a safer bet who had verbally assured the National Federation Party of his willingness to initiate immediate discussion on the constitution. By late the same evening, Rabuka's fortunes were uncertain, for by then, according to some sources, Kamikamica had secured the support of 30 parliamentarians (10 Fijian Political Party members, 1 Rotuman, 5 of the General Voters Party, and 14 from the National Federation Party), while Rabuka was supported by 20 from the Fijian Political Party, 5 Nationalists, and 1 Independent.¹⁰ Faced with this crisis, Rabuka's emissaries contacted the Fiji Labour Party in the early hours of 2 June. Soon afterward that party wrote to Rabuka. Their historic letter is reproduced here.

2 June 1992

(CONFIDENTIAL)

Major General Sitiveni Rabuka

(Hand Delivered)

Dear Major General Sitiveni Rabuka

The Fiji Labour Party has agreed to lend support to you for the position of Prime Minister on the basis that our party would be given firm assurance on the following issues in writing:

A. CONSTITUTION

The new government would immediately initiate a process of review and change of the 1990 Constitution by a jointly appointed team that would take into regard the objections that have been expressed by the Fiji Labour Party on behalf of the Indian community, urban Fijians and Western Fijians, and take immediate measures to address such objections.

Such a process to be initiated as soon as parliament convenes.

B. LABOUR REFORM DECREES

That the new government would urgently seek to have the labour decrees revoked to take account of the objections by the trade union movement in Fiji.

C: VAT [value-added tax]

That the new government would urgently scrap VAT as a matter of priority.

D: LAND

That the new government would convene a machinery to facilitate discussions on the issue of land, particularly relating to the extension of ALTA [Agricultural Landlord and Tenants Act]

That as soon as the parliament convenes, such a machinery be deliberated upon.

The Fiji Labour Party is awaiting your urgent and serious consideration of our request.

Yours Sincerely
Jokapeci Koroi (Mrs)
(President)

Rabuka replied immediately:

Mrs Jokapeci Koroi
President
Fiji Labour Party
Suva.

Dear Mrs Koroi,

I acknowledge the proposals outlined in your letter (2 June 1992) delivered this morning.

I have considered your proposals favourably and agree to take action on all the issues, namely the constitution, VAT, labour reforms and land tenure on the basis suggested in your letter.

I agree to hold discussions on the above issue in order to finalise the machinery to progress the matter further.

Yours Faithfully

S. L. Rabuka
Major General
President.

Significantly, the Fiji Labour Party also obtained an undertaking from the Fijian Nationalist Party and the *Soqosoqo ni Taukei ni Vanua*, which, according to some sources, had been instrumental in initiating the dialogue between Rabuka and Labour. These two parties' five parliamentarians (Butadroka, Gavidī, Lepani Tonitonivanua, Ratu Mosese Varasikete Tuisawau, and Mosese Tuisawau), and the nationalist-minded indepen-

dent, Kolonio Qiqiwaqa, wrote to the Labour Party: "We give our assurance that should the President accept his nomination we will support your conditions as set out by the new Prime Minister."

This stunning development left many in Fiji and outside gasping and shaking their heads in confusion. Labour supporting Rabuka? and the Nationalists agreeing with Labour's demands, among them the review of the constitution? Rabuka's courting of Labour's (or anyone else's) support is simply explained: he desperately needed the numbers Labour could deliver. Labour supported Rabuka, said Mahendra Chaudhary, probably more for public consumption than out of genuine conviction, because Rabuka was "a changed man," who had admitted being used "by certain chiefs" for their own purposes (*FT*, 2 June 1992). Moreover, Rabuka had been an ally in the resolution of the industrial disputes, whereas Kamikamica's policies had precipitated them. Some Labour leaders saw Kamikamica as a Mara "puppet," and nothing was less acceptable to them than Mara's continuing influence, however indirect or slight that influence might be. Politics played its part too. By supporting Rabuka, and hence the next government, the Labour strategists hoped to deal a death blow to the National Federation Party.

Some Labour leaders thought themselves the real winners in the 1992 elections. The party that had been given little chance of electoral success had managed to insert itself centrally into the national political process. Labour, they thought, would be the tail wagging the dog, or, as one of them said to me, while they could not be kings, they would be king-makers. Such euphoric thinking was short-lived, for once installed, Rabuka went back to his old ways, changing his mind or denying the substance of the deals he had made. He refused to review the value-added tax, as he had promised, and he dismissed any urgency to review the constitution. Three months after the election, he said he wanted a constitution "that's totally Fijian-oriented," and expressed sympathy for the Fijian Nationalist Party's wish to repatriate the Indo-Fijians to India (*CT*, 1 Oct 1992). In December, he mooted the idea of a government of national unity, with what seriousness and commitment remains to be seen. With his own support base to safeguard, and his public support among ordinary nationalist Fijians high, Rabuka is in no hurry to keep his promises. Promises, his utterances implied, were made to be broken.

Rabuka sits on the horns of a dilemma. Nationalist-minded Fijians will remind him of his oft-repeated promise to fulfil his stated goals of the coup, while Labour and others will remind him of his promises to them to

lead Fiji toward a more just society. Then there are people within his own party, with different allegiances and with personal ambitions, who regard him as an unwelcome intruder, an illegitimate usurper of their own power. Clearly, Rabuka is in an unenviable position. Leading the Fijian ship of state through turbulent, uncharted waters will require vision, skill, tact, and patience.

Rabuka, however, is not the only one who faces a dilemma. The Fijian people themselves are caught between the competing demands of two worlds, neither of which they can easily escape. On the one hand is the call to retreat from the modern world, seek succor in traditional custom, and entrust power "to a few well-meaning and knowledgeable people" because "majority rule can turn into the rule of prejudice and the power of the many to violate the rights of the few" (Ravuvu 1990, x). On the other hand is the call by the Fijian Political Party, sponsored by the chiefs, to promote "a more rapid movement from subsistence activities to commercial enterprises and paid employment, . . . to encourage greater economic freedom and competition and allow world market forces to determine prices and production for export and local markets through an efficient and private enterprise sector" (SVT 1990). There is a contradiction here that the elections, caught in the politics of race and regionalism, failed to address; it cannot be ignored, or will be ignored at the peril of the peoples of Fiji. It is easier to beat up one's opponents than to beat time. Paraphrasing T. S. Eliot, Fiji's political journey ahead is full of human vanities and whispering ambitions, cunning passages and contrived corridors.

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Notes

1 For some easily accessible surveys and commentaries on the coup literature see Lal and Peacock 1990; Macdonald 1990; and Firth 1989. For the social effects of the coups see Garrett 1990.

2 In May 1992 F\$1.00 was equal to US\$1.47.

3 The Burebasaga confederacy consists of Rewa, Serua, Namosi, Kadavu,

Nadroga, Navosa, and parts of Ba and the Yasawas; the Kubuna consists of Ra, Lomaiviti, Naitasiri, and parts of Ba and the Yasawas; the Tovata consists of Lau, Cakaudrove, Bua, and Macuata; and the proposed Yasayasa Vaka Ra would comprise Ba, the Yasawas, Nadroga, and parts of Navosa, Ra, Serua, and Namosi (see Lal 1922*b*, 324).

4 The 19 votes were distributed as follows: 1 each from the 14 rural constituencies and 5 representing the 5 urban seats.

5 These included Adi Finau Tabakauco, Inoke Tabua, Tomasi Vakatora, Joape Rokosoi, and Taniela Veitata.

6 From his manifesto, a copy of which is in my possession.

7 From the party's manifesto and election material in my possession.

8 A copy of this document is in my possession. The quotes in the following paragraphs are from the same document.

9 From the General Voters Party's election manifesto in my possession.

10 Much of this, and the letters reproduced, come from the proceedings of the 7th Annual Convention of the Fiji Labour Party, 14–15 August 1992.

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Abstract

Fiji went to the polls in late May 1992, five years after the coups of 1987, and two years after the promulgation of a new constitution that entrenches indigenous Fijian supremacy in the political process. The elections were a welcome small step toward the restoration of a semblance of parliamentary democracy in Fiji. They also produced a result that confounded conventional wisdom. Sitiveni Rabuka became prime minister with the support of the Fiji Labour Party he had ousted from power in 1987. The National Federation Party–Fiji Labour Party Coalition disintegrated on the eve of the elections, with the two parties engaging in a bitter contest for votes in the Indo-Fijian community. Fragmentation was also the trend in the Fijian community. These developments and the politics behind them are considered in detail within a framework that looks retrospectively at the major political and economic developments since the coups. The issues examined include the interim administration's economic policies, which unwittingly helped forge alliances across ethnic and ideological divides; the controversy over the 1990 constitution and its rejection by the opposition Indo-Fijian parties; the emergence of new political parties and conflicts in the Fijian camp; the disarray in the Coalition over whether or not to boycott the election; the campaign; and the race for prime ministership between Rabuka and Josefata Kamikamica. Drama aside, the elections failed to address some of the fundamental structural problems that face the people of Fiji and will need to be addressed sooner or later.