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The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2015

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Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2015

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New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Papua, and Solomon Islands are not reviewed in this issue.

Fiji

For the most part, 2015 was a good year for the government led by Josaia Voreqe “Frank” Bainimarama. With 59 percent of the 2014 national vote at the September 2014 election, and 32 of the 50 seats in Parliament, the governing FijiFirst Party had a strong mandate. In view of the disarray of the Opposition, FijiFirst had good prospects of winning the next election, scheduled for 2018. Robust economic growth continued for a third successive year in 2015, and the government sustained its modernizing agenda with extensive infrastructure spending as well as legal and educational reforms. Nevertheless, stability remains elusive. Sections of the indigenous community are deeply hostile to the FijiFirst administration. The Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) remains determined to clamp down firmly on any potential or perceived threat. Efforts by Police Commissioner Ben Groenewald, an expatriate South African, to bring to justice members of the security forces for human-rights abuses were frustrated by RFMF intervention. In November, Groenewald resigned, more in despair than protest.

The Fiji economy is growing strongly. Two sluggish years (2.7% gross domestic product [GDP] growth in 2011, 1.8% in 2012) have been followed by three years of more rapid

expansion: 4.6 percent in 2013, 3.8 percent in 2014, and an expected 4.3 percent in 2015 (ADB 2015a; IMF 2015). Despite this, Fiji’s GDP per capita remains below the level reached in 2006 (Chand 2015, 204). Tourism and remittance earnings have been the main drivers of growth, while sugar has continued to stagnate with many farmers exiting the industry and a contraction of the land area under cane cultivation. Visitor arrivals over 2015 were substantially above 2012–2014 levels, and capital investment during 2013–2015 has been sustained above 25 percent of GDP—driven upward by heavy public spending on roads and bridges (RBF 2015). In May, Standard & Poor’s raised Fiji’s sovereign credit rating from B to B+. In September, the Fiji government was able to roll over its 2016 maturing loan, with a fresh F\$200 million bond at 6.6 percent interest (F\$1.00 is equivalent to around US\$0.46). Public debt has fallen from 55 percent of GDP in 2010 to 49.5 percent in 2015 (ADB 2015b, 5), excluding the liabilities of state-owned corporations (entailing approximately an additional 30% of GDP).

The sugar industry remains deeply troubled, despite some improvement over 2011–2014. The Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) was suspended from the Suva stock exchange owing to severe financial difficulties in October 2009 and was officially delisted in 2010. It reported negative earnings of F\$36.8 million in 2009 and F\$179.1 million in 2010, but thereafter showed

some signs of recovery with operating losses claimed to be diminishing from F\$32 million in 2011 to F\$14 million in 2012, F\$10 million in 2013, and F\$5 million in 2014 (*Fiji Times*, 14 May 2015; Narsey 2015a). According to the official figures, the government paid F\$175 million in 2010 and F\$36.5 million in 2012 to cover FSC deficits (*Fiji Times*, 13 Feb 2015). The FSC reported assets of F\$227 million in 2014, but its liabilities amounted to F\$374 million (FSC 2014). According to National Federation Party (NFP) leader Biman Prasad, the number of sugarcane growers has fallen from 18,000 to 13,000 over 2007–2015 (*Fiji Times*, 13 Feb 2015). Many of those “farmers” who remain now cultivate diminished plots solely to pay their Taukei Land Trust Board (TLTB) rents but rely on ancillary incomes for other basic needs. Farmers report increasing difficulty recruiting cane cutters at harvesting time.

Partial stabilization over 2012–2014 occurred with assistance from US-owned refiner Tate & Lyle, which continues to purchase the bulk of Fiji sugar for European markets. The relief is likely to be temporary. Fiji sugar prices had widely been expected to decrease over 2009–2015 in tandem with the 36 percent phased decline in the European Union’s officially declared “reference price.” In earlier years, the European Union (EU) reference price had fluctuated around two or three times the price paid for raw sugar on the open world market. Until 2010, the price actually paid by European refiners for sugar from the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries (including Fiji) closely tracked the reference price. After the

European Union announced its phased decline, however, actual EU market prices diverged sharply upward above the EU reference price over 2011–2013 (EC 2015). This assisted Fiji’s sugar earnings, as did the 20 percent Fiji devaluation in 2009 and “Fairtrade” premiums paid by Tate & Lyle. (“Fairtrade” certification is a device to improve earnings for cane growers if the industry meets certain standards; see Fairtrade International 2015.) Subsequently, over 2013–2014, the EU market price fell to closer to the official reference price, and as of late 2015 both the EU official price and the actual market price paid were close to levels on the open world market (EC 2016). Refiners like Tate & Lyle have effectively been restricted to supplies from ACP countries by sizable EU tariffs on non-ACP sugar, thus encouraging a divergence between the European internal/ACP sugar price and the world market price, but preferential access to the European market will end in 2017, after which FSC Chief Executive Officer Abdul Khan anticipates a 30 percent price decline (*Fiji Times*, 18 July 2015). Tate & Lyle’s 2015 decision to cancel the Fairtrade premium (around 15%) paid to Fiji growers eliminated another important lifeline for the industry (*Fiji Times*, 11 Aug 2015).

The 2015 budget set out ambitious targets for privatization, with earnings anticipated to reach F\$507 million over the year (IMF 2014; FijiLive, 21 April 2015), but the most significant divestments have been to the country’s main pension provider, the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF). In November, government announced a F\$100 million partnership deal for 59

percent of the shares of the hitherto wholly government-owned Fiji Ports Corporation Ltd, with the FNPF to purchase 39 percent and Sri Lankan-based company Aitken Spence to acquire a 20 percent stake (*Fiji Sun*, 10 Nov 2015; Fiji Government 2015). In 2013, Aitken Spence had acquired 51 percent of Fiji Ports Terminal Ltd, which manages the Suva and Lautoka international ports, with government retaining a 49 percent share (*Fiji Sun*, 3 Feb 2015). In December, the government sold half of its remaining stake in Amalgamated Telecom Holdings Group (ATH) for F\$89 million, mostly to the FNPF (*Fiji Times*, 23 Dec 2015). ATH subsidiaries include Telecom Fiji Limited, Internet Services Fiji (Connect), Fiji International Telecoms (FINTEL), and, since July 2014, the 100 percent locally owned Vodafone Fiji Ltd (ATH 2014). Major state assets, such as the Fiji Electricity Authority and Airports Fiji Ltd, have proved more difficult to sell. The FNPF, which faces heavy restrictions on foreign investment, owns F\$4.5 billion in net assets, most of which have been transferred from government entities (FNPF 2014).

The 2016 budget reduced the value-added tax (VAT) from 15 percent to 9 percent, reversing a rise signaled in the 2011 budget. At the same time, the zero duty on some basic food-stuffs and medicines was removed. So the net effect does not entail a major reduction in government VAT earnings. To boost revenues, the Service Turnover Tax was doubled from 5 percent to 10 percent, and a new 6 percent “Environment Levy” was imposed on tourism operators, entailing a major shift in government taxation toward

reliance on greater sourcing from Fiji’s biggest industry. Regular switches in government policy and absence of consultation with stakeholders are often seen as harmful to commercial confidence, but Fiji business leaders—as well as offshore companies operating in Fiji—remain mostly supportive of the Bainimarama-led administration. The projected 2015 budget deficit was a modest 2.5 percent of GDP (Dornan 2014), but the government split its roads and infrastructure expenditure to spread the load over 2015–2016.

The results of the 2014 polls indicated an electoral calculation likely to be sustained over the medium term (see Fraenkel 2015a, 2015c). With proportions of the population now tilted around 62 percent/34 percent in favor of i-Taukei (as indigenous Fijians are now called under the 2013 Constitution) compared to Fiji Indians, the 2014 outcome turned on the ethnic Fijian vote, which was split between Bainimarama’s FijiFirst Party and the major Opposition party SODELPA (better known by its acronym than by its full title, the Social Democratic Liberal Party. SODELPA is the largely indigenous Fijian party of the government that was deposed in the 2006 coup. It was forced by a decree abolishing Fijian party names to stop calling itself Soqosoqo Dua-vata ni Lewenivanua and then by another decree to drop the acronym SDL. It opted for “SODELPA” to retain the publicly well-known initials SDL). The Fiji-Indian vote for FijiFirst is much more assured and unlikely to go to any other party. With some justification, Bainimarama could claim that “under my Government, the i-Taukei [*sic*] are more secure, have more

opportunities” and he could point to state delivery of “better roads, better housing, better medical facilities, free medicine, [and] free water” (quoted in *FijiLive*, 30 April 2015; note that the “i” in i-Taukei is the definite article, so stating “the i-Taukei” is like saying “the the indigenous Fijians”). Many Taukei had switched to *FijiFirst* in 2014 because of these developments, but it is still too early to assess the impact of Bainimarama’s reform program, critical features of which commenced only in the run-up to the 2014 polls. What is clear is that the next election will likewise depend on the battle for the indigenous vote, and much of the energy of the government over 2015 was directed toward sustaining and building on that support.

Fiji’s Parliament, now returned to its pre-1987 coup location in central Suva, still echoes the bitter rivalries associated with the 2006 military takeover. In February, an Opposition member called the prime minister “kaisi” (person of low rank) in Parliament, echoing the cleavage between high-ranking Taukei chiefs on the Opposition side and those outside the traditional indigenous establishment on the government side. Bainimarama, who was commander of the RFMF until March 2014, retorted that Parliament should work like a military establishment, where “nobody really gives two hoots about your title, supposedly your blue blood” (*Fiji Times*, 8 March 2015; *FijiLive*, 10 Feb 2015). In May, SODELPA’s Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, the Tui Cakau (paramount chief of Cakaudrove, with authority extending into Bua and Macuata provinces) was suspended for two years for uttering obsceni-

ties against the Speaker, Jiko Luveni (*Fiji Sun*, 22 May 2015). Opposition leader Ro Teimumu Kepa, Roko Tui Dreketi (paramount chief of Rewa and the broader Burebasaga confederacy) said the suspension was an abuse of powers by the Speaker, and SODELPA briefly boycotted Parliament (RNZI, 22 May 2015; *FijiLive*, 6 July 2015). In the budget debate in November, SODELPA’s Isoa Tikoca—in a characteristically gruff voice—accused the government of corruption. Attorney General Sayed-Khaiyum reacted by parodying that voice and gesturing with arms akimbo like a monkey. When accused of racism, Sayed-Khaiyum claimed to have been mimicking the voice of Darth Vader from the movie *Star Wars* (*Fiji Sun*, 21 Nov 2015). Few could recall such gestures by those on the “dark side.”

The paired authority of Bainimarama (now civilian prime minister, minister of i-Taukei affairs and sugar) and Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum (now attorney general, minister of finance, public enterprises, public service, and communications) has been accentuated in the wake of the 2014 polls. Sayed-Khaiyum runs much of the business of the government, while Bainimarama embarks on frequent official trips around Fiji and overseas. Sayed-Khaiyum (of Muslim descent) is often reviled by conservative ethnic Fijians and anti-regime blogsites as spearheading an “Islamic takeover,” and he travels within Fiji with a strong personal security detail. By contrast, Bainimarama is regularly celebrated as a compassionate and accessible leader who is sensitive to the interests of i-Taukei. Bainimarama welcomes text messages on his mobile phone to alert

him to respond to the plight of Fiji citizens but leaves Sayed-Khaiyum—as finance minister—to fund the associated expenditures. Casualties of the new order often report that their termination was ordered after they had fallen out with the attorney general. Reports of military disquiet centered on Sayed-Khaiyum were confirmed in 2011 by now-imprisoned former Land Force Commander Pita Driti and the exiled former Third Infantry Regiment commander, Ratu Tevita Mara (who now resides in Tonga). Another former military officer, Pio Tikoduadua, minister for infrastructure and transport (but formerly permanent secretary in the Prime Minister's Office, 2009–2014) resigned his parliamentary seat in May 2015, ostensibly for health reasons (Tikoduadua 2015; FijiLive, 11 May 2015). Within Fiji, his rift with the attorney general was public knowledge, at least among the urban elite, but so too were the whispered allegations about financial mismanagement in his ministry.

Throughout 2015, FijiFirst made ample use of its majority on the floor of Parliament. By the end of 2015, the splendidly refurbished Parliament website reported forty-eight acts passed and 184 divisions since October 2014 (in parliamentary procedure, a “division” is an alternative to a voice vote in which members of Parliament rise from their seats). Leaving aside absences, the government side remained solid in all 184 votes, aside from just three occasions when there was a single dissenting vote and two cases of abstention. The Opposition was only slightly less homogenous, with the fifteen SODELPA and three NFP members of Parliament vot-

ing as a bloc on nearly all occasions (Fiji Parliament 2015). In April, the government announced that schools that once served as bastions of indigenous chiefly authority, such as Queen Victoria School, Adi Cakobau School, and Ratu Kadavulevu School, would henceforth cater primarily for rural students (*Fiji Times*, 2 April 2015; *Islands Business*, 14 April 2014). Ro Teimumu said it was part of the plan to destroy Fijian institutions and a continuation of the strategy that had seen Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs disbanded in 2012 (ABC, 13 April 2015). Over 2015, SODELPA chose to make indigenous rights its primary focus. At the 14th session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York in April, pro- and anti-government representatives did battle with each other on the issue of whether or not those rights were adequately protected under Fiji's 2013 constitution (FijiLive, 23 April 2015).

Other issues, such as corruption and human rights abuses, obtained a lesser focus. Speaker Jiko Luveni had allowed the Opposition to take chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), triggering some controversy in her FijiFirst party. Opposition leader Ro Teimumu Kepa appointed NFP leader Biman Prasad to take the post. Most of the issues raised in the PAC's May 2015 Consolidated Report on the auditor general's 2007–2009 reports concerned cases of maladministration of government finances rather than evidence of gross corruption. The report highlighted cases of extravagance, weak tendering and procurement, and poor collection of revenues (PAC 2015). Nevertheless, the government was angered by

this novel scrutiny of its expenditures, and Sayed-Khaiyum claimed that the PAC was acting beyond its jurisdiction (RNZI, 27 July 2015). Parliamentary deliberation was clearly vexing those accustomed to rule by decree. In July, the government used its majority to secure a reduction in sitting times, from seven to four weeks (*Fiji Times*, 9 July 2015)

In its 2014 annual report, the Fiji Independent Commission against Corruption (FICAC) recorded 79 convictions since its inception in 2007; 26 cases acquitted, withdrawn, or declared nolle prosequi (charges discontinued); and 121 cases pending. Scores were still being settled with those associated with the ousted pre-2006 government. Former TLTB Chief Executive Kalivati Bakani and his director, Keni Dakuidreketi, were sent to prison for three and six years, respectively, and the chief executive and directors of the *Fiji Post* were handed down jail sentences, but two cases were dropped against deposed Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase due to “insufficient evidence” (FICAC 2015). FICAC is an institution that “sends shivers down some people’s spines,” boasted the attorney general as FICAC’s employees assembled for their annual awards night (*Fiji Sun*, 17 Jan 2016). Cabinet ministers feel less threatened. Allegations that the government was—over 2010–2011—secretly paying unspecified ministerial salaries through Aliz Pacific, an accounting firm owned by the attorney general’s aunt, Nur Bano Ali, were confirmed by the Auditor General’s Office in 2014 (for details, see Fraenkel 2015b). In October 2015, the government tentatively released

restricted additional information to the media, along with the explanation that “the contracting out of payroll service was deemed necessary at that time to create efficiency and maintain confidentiality of personal information given the political and administrative climate” (*Fiji Sun*, 8 Oct 2015). The report said that such irregular payments had since been discontinued, but it did not reveal the amounts involved (see Narsey 2015b).

The fallout from the 2014 election defeat has taken a heavy toll on SODELPA. In August 2015, an internal party document, the Gaunavinaka report, was leaked to the media. It revealed considerable disquiet about the party’s leadership and aired allegations of mishandling of Opposition office funds. The authors accused the SODELPA leadership of aiming to “paddle their political ambitions” but without “conviction for the indigenous cause.” It claimed that the “public is of the opinion that the Leader of the Opposition is weak, has no vision and has compromised the principles of the party with her hidden agendas to cling to power.” Ro Teimumu was berated for lack of consultation and was told to support any caucus decision “whether it’s right or wrong” (Bulitavu and Radrodoro 2015). One of the report’s authors, Member of Parliament Moses Bulitavu, threatened to resign unless action was taken and claimed to have the backing of the Bua, Cakaudrove, and Macuata SODELPA offices (*Fiji Sun*, 19 Aug 2015). From Burebasaga, the loyal Jese Sikivou wrote that the “vanua of Rewa” was deeply hurt about the allegations against their chief (Sikivou 2015). Gaunavinaka report authors

were equally offended by claims that Ratu Naiqama, the Tui Cakau, was “asking [for] money” from “embarrassed Fijians” while on tour in America (Bulitavu and Radrodro 2015).

The schism stopped short of culminating in a SODELPA split in 2015. Ratu Naiqama distanced himself from the Gaunavinaka report, and in September Ro Teimumu and Ratu Naiqama issued a joint statement rejecting claims of a rift between them (RNZI, 1 Sept 2015). After the release of the report, 1992–1999 prime minister and 1987 coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka resigned from the party, claiming that SODELPA was headed toward self-destruction and evidently frustrated that Ro Teimumu’s faction had blocked his leadership aspirations (Rabuka 2015). Bulitavu was pardoned by SODELPA’s management board in order to prevent further ruptures. An internal investigative team headed by former Permanent Secretary Anare Jale found some support for allegations of financial impropriety. Principal Administration Manager at the Office of the Leader of the Opposition Mick Beddoes—a rare part-European politician in the otherwise fairly solidly Taukei SODELPA firmament—was sacrificed in December. The gloating *Fiji Sun*, which had triumphantly exposed the Gaunavinaka turmoil, described the departing Beddoes as “Mr Unpopular” and “the Man with the Donald Trump Mouth” (*Fiji Sun*, 31 Dec 2015). It was the end of a fifteen-year political career for a man who had traversed the spectrum of Fiji politics from leader of the Opposition under the SDL governments (2002–2004, 2006) to SODELPA stalwart.

In October, Bulitavu wrote to the *Fiji Sun* denouncing SODELPA’s efforts to restore Fiji’s Great Council of Chiefs on the grounds that this was a vehicle for the supremacy of Bau Island (off the eastern coast of Fiji’s main island, Viti Levu) through the confederacy system (Bau was the home of Ratu Seru Cakobau, who ceded Fiji to Queen Victoria in 1874). The claims of the Vunivalu kei Bau (paramount chief of Bau) to serve as the “supreme chief of the iTaukei people” were repudiated in favor of the ancient and supposedly more egalitarian claims of the Ratu Mai Verata (Verata is located to the north of Bau, also on Viti Levu’s east coast). Tribes on Vanua Levu (Fiji’s second largest island) were said to recognize that their “Vu” (first ancestor) came from Verata and to have honored “a tax system of i sevu” entailing tributes from Wailevu, Labasa, Savusavu, Natewa Bay, and Udu Point (in the extreme east of Vanua Levu). Bulitavu’s article called on the Bainimarama government to “realign the tribal history” in accordance “with the preamble of the 2013 Constitution” by conferring authority on this “Verata ancient heritage.” The government was also enjoined to renounce “the breach of tribal rights surrounding the signing of the Deed of Cession 1874” (*Fiji Sun*, 10 Oct, 30 Sept 2015). Homogeneity in the SODELPA response to Bainimarama had clearly been breached, even if the Bau/Verata cleavage was a poor fit for Opposition reconfiguration if only because chiefs from both Bau and Verata had become closely associated with support for the FijiFirst government. Bulitavu, who had been arrested some years earlier

for defacing road-safety billboards featuring Bainimarama's image, was denounced by SODELPA loyalists for endorsing the FijiFirst government's destruction of the Great Council of Chiefs.

More evidence of indigenous disquiet had emerged in November 2014, when Nadroga chief Ratu Osea Gavidu purported to establish a sovereign "Christian state" and to have presided over the swearing in of eighteen cabinet ministers at Cuvu, near the Shangri-La's Fijian Resort (*Fiji Sun*, 8 Nov 2014). A statement from the group echoed familiar ethno-nationalist themes about alleged British failure at the time of independence in 1970 to return Fiji to descendants of the original signatories of the 1874 Deed of Cession. Australian resident and indigenous rights campaigner Oni Kiriwin, styled "attorney general" of the new state, had reportedly been dispatched to "Buchingham Palace" [*sic*] to "officially meet Her Majesty THE QUEEN" (*Fiji Sun*, 8 Nov 2014). In May 2015, Oni Kiriwin reported on her Facebook page that "Almighty God" had spoken to her and that the Nadroga group had passed into law "ten commandments" (Kiriwin 2015). In November, sixteen Nadroga chiefs appeared before the Lautoka High Court charged with sedition and inciting communal violence (Fijivillage, 26 Aug 2015; RNZI, 7 Nov 2015). Gavidu was well known in Fiji for crackpot schemes over the previous decade but generally not taken greatly seriously, at least by urban professionals in Suva. In Nadroga, now hosting several substantial new resorts and an international golf course at Natadola Beach, Ratu Osea's plan for a

federal Fiji—with provinces serving as Australian-style state governments—had greater resonance. He died in April 2015, but the flag of the would-be Nadroga-Navosa Christian state continued to fly above Gavidu's bure (traditional thatched house) at Cuvu until the newly installed Turaga Na Ka Levu (paramount chief) of Nadroga, Ratu Kinijoji Vosailagi, requested that the police take it down in August (*Fiji Sun*, 14 Aug 2015).

Kiriwin also claimed to be behind another secessionist bid in Ra Province, in northeastern Viti Levu, and in Australia she had separatist flags designed for both breakaway "Christian states." On 28 October 2014, at Uluda in the Nakauvadra Mountains, the Ra group denounced the "oppressive, dictatorial and tyrannical nature of the Bainimarama/Khaiyum regime" with its "nirvana concept of a polity of equality" and "dream" of a "modern progressive Fiji." The Uluda Declaration purported to express the aspirations of "ethnic peoples, first nation peoples of Fiji and therefore sovereign people of this land" and paid homage to Kosovo's "right to secede from an oppressive government." It criticized the government's "perverse form of social engineering which employs constitutionally enshrined laws of 'mainstreaming' with which it enforces intensive assimilation that selects only the native Fijian race as its target group" (Uluda Declaration, reproduced in Field 2015). It was no accident that the group was making its statement from the Nakauvadra ranges, onetime home of Navosavakadua and the nineteenth-century Tuka cult (see Nicole 2011). In mid-2014, news filtered out that indige-

nous Fijians in the Ra hills were being trained, using wooden replica guns, by a former soldier in the British army. Police Commissioner Groenewald said the group was “more like a cult” and posed no threat to national security (RNZI, 14 Aug 2015).

The reaction of Bainimarama was much less relaxed. “There will be no so-called independent states in Fiji,” he thundered: “Anyone who swears an illegal oath will face the full force of the law” (FBC, 15 Aug 2015). “We Will Crush Any Revolt: PM” roared the front page of the *Fiji Sun* (15 Aug 2015). In his address at the opening of Parliament, outgoing President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau told the assembled members that should they fail to condemn the would-be uprising it would “cast doubt” on their commitment to democracy (Nailatikau 2015). Since the 2013 constitution had been imposed without any referendum or any deliberation by a constituent assembly, that argument won negligible Opposition support. Defence Minister Timoci Natuva said that “more influential people” were behind the rebels (Hansard, 27 Aug 2015). SODELPA said it had no links with the secessionists (*Fiji Sun*, 1 May 2015). In Australia, Fiji-born Australian National University (ANU) Professor Brij V Lal, still banned from his homeland, said it was a “diversionary” tactic to deflect criticism from the government (SBS, 31 Aug 2015). Others thought it signaled indigenous disorientation in the wake of Bainimarama’s abolition of the Great Council of Chiefs. On 26 August, thirty villagers from Ra were brought before the court in Tavua charged with “sedition” and foment-

ing “communal antagonism,” with a heavy military presence on the town’s streets (*Fiji Times*, 26 Aug 2015). By the end of August, more than seventy dissidents had been arrested and Oni Kiriwin had been banned from Fiji (RNZI, 25 Aug 2015; *Fiji Sun*, 29 Aug 2015). Lawyer Aman Ravindra-Singh, representing some of the Ra rebels, said that a clerk from his law firm had been grabbed and bundled into a car by men wearing “military boots” and had then been repeatedly “pricked by a needle” and “injected” with “some sort of liquid” (RNZI, 4 Dec 2015). Plans by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Relations and Defence to look into Singh’s allegations were blocked by the attorney general (*Fiji Times*, 16 Dec 2015).

Other signs emerged of the still fragile security situation. In November 2015, Police Commissioner Groenewald resigned, stating that one reason for his departure was government cover-up of cases of brutality by the security services (ABC, 20 Nov, 11 Nov 2015). He had been appointed in May 2014, in the wake of seven and a half years of military control over the police force. Groenewald had earned some popular acclaim by confronting five burglars during a restaurant robbery in Flagstaff and forcing them out with a chair, leaving himself with injuries that required thirteen stitches (*Fiji Times*, 22 May 2015). He had staked his reputation on investigating several tricky police brutality cases, including the Vilikesa Soko murder case, the arrest and beating of Joseva Bilitaki, and the assault of Iowane Benedito and Epeli Qaraniqio. Vilikesa Soko had been arrested for a Nadi robbery in November 2014 and died after a

vicious beating while in police custody. Joseva Bilitaki was a retired teacher who had complained of the use of his songs by FijiFirst during their 2014 election campaign, precipitating an angry exchange of text messages with Bainimarama. Following that correspondence, he was arrested in December 2014 and beaten up by members of the security services (RNZI, 10 Oct, 20 Oct 2015). The most widely reported of these cases, the torture of recaptured escaped convicts Iowane Benedito and Epeli Qaraniqio in 2013, was recorded on video and released on YouTube. The gruesome footage showed five members of the security forces beating Benedito with a metal pipe in an effort to cripple him and setting dogs on Qaraniqio, both as punishment for absconding and as a method of preventing any repeat escape (YouTube, 2013). Suffering serious injuries, Qaraniqio had his leg amputated shortly thereafter.

Bainimarama had said at the time, “I will stick by my men,” and he proved true to his word. The prime minister told the media that the three police officers and two military officers had “done their duty in looking after the security of this nation and making sure we sleep peacefully at night” (interview on Fijivillage, 9 March 2013). Groenewald’s investigations were frustrated when the three police officers, who had been suspended, were recruited into the RFMF. Land Force Commander Sitiveni Qiliho explained that they had been “abandoned by the police” and echoed Bainimarama in stating “we will stand by our men and women through thick and thin” (RNZI, 9 Nov, 10 Nov 2015), evoking a spirit

of camaraderie with considerable resonance for a coup-prone and heavily militarized state like Fiji. One of those implicated was found to be Pita Matairavula, formerly the prime minister’s personal bodyguard. The police chief had informed Bainimarama of his intention to arrest the five officers, but the RFMF protected Matairavula. As a result, Groenewald—understandably—found his position untenable, though his resignation letter also included comments about unsanitary living conditions (RNZI, 20 Nov 2015). He returned to South Africa.

The new acting police commissioner was the RFMF’s Qiliho, who had himself been implicated in several human rights abuse cases (including the 2009 assault on ANU historian Professor Brij Lal). Lawyer Richard Naidu, an Opposition nominee on the Constitutional Offices Commission, resigned in protest at the appointment. On his Facebook page, Naidu said that the commission was acting in a “haphazard fashion, mostly on the basis of last minute emails, reflecting either disorganisation or a lack of interest in good governance” (Naidu 2015). Rivalry between the military and the police force had remained acute since the military takeover in 2006, but the brief resurrection of police independence under Groenewald was soon quashed. Under Qiliho, it was announced that most of the senior police officers would be retired (*Fiji Sun*, 14 Jan 2016).

Groenewald was not the only official in a top security post to resign in 2015. In August, it was announced that Brigadier General Mosese Tikoi-toga had resigned as RFMF commander and that Captain Viliame

Naupoto was to take his place in an “acting” role. Tikoitoga had only been appointed eighteen months earlier, after Bainimarama stepped down as commander to pursue a career in civilian politics. Rumors swirled on the overseas blogsites about renewed tensions in the RFMF, as well as about an awkward extramarital affair. The official statement said Tikoitoga had resigned to become Fiji’s new high commissioner to South Africa. The real reason was that Tikoitoga had been showing increasing independence, replacing those appointed by his predecessor to powerful positions and preventing Bainimarama’s personal bodyguards from entering the officer’s mess. The South African High Commission was a new post commenced only in 2011, but in November it was announced that Fiji’s mission in Pretoria was to be closed. A diplomat at the South African mission in Suva had been involved in a fatal drunk-driving incident in August but pleaded diplomatic immunity. The Fiji government had asked South Africa to waive that immunity (*Fiji Sun*, 21 Oct 2015), but without success. Instead of the Pretoria post, Fiji would open a new embassy in Ethiopia “given its strategic importance in Africa” and its role in the Organization of African Unity (FBC, 19 Nov 2015). It was a sign of how far and how rapidly Tikoitoga had fallen from grace that he would now be deployed to the Horn of Africa.

Aside from the police commissioner, the military commander, and the once powerful Minister for Infrastructure Pio Tikoduadua, many other influential figures in the Bainimarama government resigned during 2015,

echoing a pattern from earlier post-2006 coup years. Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Information Sharon Smith-Johns resigned in October, citing personal reasons (*Fiji Sun*, 29 Oct 2015). In November, disillusioned spin doctor Graham Davis resigned his consultancy with Qorvis MSLGroup, supposedly to return to Australia (Fijileaks, 10 Nov 2015). Qorvis is a US-based public relations firm that has earned US\$20 million globally since 2010 representing countries with poor human-rights records; see CPI 2015). Aisake Taito resigned as chief executive officer of the FPNP in April (*Fiji Times*, 5 May 2015). In November, Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Finance Filimone Waqabaca resigned to become ambassador to New Zealand. Acting Permanent Secretary Basundra Kumar departed her post in the Ministry of Education in December 2014 and in her resignation letter denounced “parochialism, cronyism and favoritism” in the ministry, for which she was vigorously denounced by her minister, Mahendra Reddy (Fijileaks, 1 Jan 2015; *Fiji Times*, 7 Jan 2015). Dr Neil Sharma, the former health minister, resigned from Parliament in April. The website Fijileaks had revealed that the FICAC was pursuing charges against Sharma for manipulating tendering processes (RNZI, 6 Nov 2014). When new permanent secretaries were announced in December 2015, only three of the twenty had been the previous incumbents in those roles (*Fiji Times*, 18 Dec 2015).

Ratu Epeli Nailatikau’s term as president ended in 2015. A former military officer, Major General Jioji Konrote, was selected as the new

president, the first non-Taukei and the first non-chiefly candidate to hold the post. The Opposition's nominee was Ratu Epeli Ganilau, the former defense minister who had resigned from the Bainimarama government in 2010. Like the departing incumbent president, Ganilau is married to one of the daughters of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, Fiji's long-serving post-independence prime minister (1970–1987, 1987–1992) and then president (1993–2000). That Ganilau now featured as SODELPA's favored choice for a president was a sign of how closely the Mara dynasty had become associated with the Opposition. The Gaunavinaka report even speculated that Adi Koila Mara—the retiring president's wife and daughter of Ratu Mara—might become SODELPA's next leader. At the September 2014 polls, Lau Province—covering the scattered islands of eastern Fiji—was the only one of Fiji's fourteen provinces to record a SODELPA majority. Lau is also the ancestral home of the Mara family, where Ratu Sir Kamisese was Tui Lau and Tui Nayau (see Scarr 2008). In October 2015, it was announced that the next Tui Nayau would be Ratu Mara's eldest son, Ratu Finau (*Fiji Times*, 3 Oct 2015). In Jioji Konrote, the government chose a politician with a stellar military record but without a strong political base. Exiled Professor Brij Lal said that Konrote was “widely believed” to be keeping “the presidential seat warm until Bainimarama is ready to move up to Government House after another term or two in parliament” (Lal 2015).

The September 2014 election heralded the end of international sanc-

tions, but Fiji continued to reposition itself on the international front. Echoing debates in New Zealand about changing the national flag so as to drop its inclusion of the Union Jack, Bainimarama announced a competition in February to come up with a new flag for Fiji. “We need to replace the symbols on our existing flag that are out of date and no longer relevant, including some anchored to our colonial past,” said the prime minister. “The shield on our flag has the British Lion and the Cross of St George,” he said, asking, “What does this have to do with us?” (Bainimarama 2015). The queen has also vanished from Fiji's banknotes and coinage, which now feature native birds and fauna and national landmarks. The new flag would remove the Union Jack and escutcheon, the shield on the flag that includes depiction of the dove that was the symbol of Ratu Seru Cakobau's precolonial 1871–1874 kingdom. Another target was the country's coat of arms, which features the escutcheon held up by two Taukei warriors, one bearing a spear and the other a war club. Former Foreign Minister Kalio-pate Tavola, Fiji's unsuccessful candidate for the position of Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) secretary-general in 2014, wondered whether “our history” had been declared a “no go zone” (Tavola 2015).

In his 2013 New Year's address, Bainimarama had deemed the flag change necessary “to reflect a sense of national renewal, to reinforce a new Fijian identity and a new confidence in being Fijian on the global stage” (quoted on ABC, 2 Jan 2013). Yet by mid-2015, market research pollsters were reporting that 53 percent

of respondents wanted to retain the existing flag, and 86 percent wanted a referendum on any change (*Fiji Times*, 27 June 2015). In June, the National Flag Committee released twenty-three potential designs for a new flag (RNZI, 12 June 2015). Bainimarama rejected the Opposition call for a referendum on the issue. The committee selected five finalists but was then instructed by the attorney general to seek additional options (RNZI, 22 June 2015). The plan had been to raise the new flag on the forty-fifth anniversary of independence in October, although Bainimarama showed no great urgency in finalizing the decision (*Fiji Times*, 22 Dec 2015). This was one of several issues with potential to offend indignant sensibilities that the prime minister handled cautiously. In the New Year, he announced that a new flag, preserving only the navy blue color of its predecessor, would be hoisted on Constitution Day, 7 September 2016 (*Fiji Times*, 17 Jan 2016).

The scheduled February 2015 meeting in Australia to deliberate on changes to the Pacific's regional architecture did not go ahead. The Fiji government remained committed to a restructure of the Pacific Islands Forum so as to diminish the influence of—or exclude altogether—Australia and New Zealand. Nevertheless, the earlier position of nonattendance at annual PIF summits was softened. Although Fiji government officials would attend, Bainimarama said that “as Head of Government, I will not participate in any Forum Leaders’ Meeting until the issue of the undue influence of Australia and New Zealand and our divergence of views is addressed” (*Fiji Sun*, 7 May 2015).

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key said it was just Bainimarama “mouthing off” and hinted none too subtly that Australia and New Zealand would withdraw funding if excluded (RNZI, 13 April 2015). Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi suggested that the PIF Secretariat headquarters be moved out of Fiji and said that Bainimarama’s specialty was to “play the [military] drum and yell left, right, stop” rather than effectively engage in regional affairs. The Fiji prime minister retorted that Tuilaepa was Australia and New Zealand’s “lapdog” and that Canberra and Wellington’s preparedness to “dangle funding in front of us” betrayed a “poor view of what our relationship should look like” (*Samoa Observer*, 19 April, 26 April 2015). Other less partisan commentators sympathized with Bainimarama’s call for some reconfiguration of the Forum (Fry 2015).

Fears of growing Chinese influence have been a major factor encouraging Australia’s 2010–2015 reengagement with the Bainimarama government as well as with the RFMF. In July, HMAS *Leeuwin* became the first Royal Australian Navy vessel to visit Fiji since the 2006 coup, and it conducted joint surveillance of waters around Rotuma with the Fiji Navy (Staples 2015). According to one analysis, Chinese bilateral assistance to Fiji surpassed that from Australia over 2006–2013 (Brandt 2015; Lowy Institute 2015). In June, a delegation from China’s Guangdong Province signed twenty-four project agreements with Fiji government and private agencies (FijiLive, 1 June 2015). Results of Chinese assistance have been of mixed quality.

The Chinese-constructed Nadarivatu hydroelectric dam opened in 2012 but has experienced difficulties owing to a failure to negotiate conclusively over water catchments with local land-owners (JICA 2015, 24), and, more urgently, low rainfall over 2014 and probably also 2015 (for 2013–2014 data, see FEA 2015). The long-planned low-to-medium-cost housing project in the Suva suburb of Tacirua never got off the ground (Housing Authority of Fiji 2015), although 210 Chinese-constructed public rental flats in Raiwai were opened in September 2014 (Fijivillage, 1 Sept 2014). Chinese contractors have been heavily engaged in Fiji's road-building activities, drawing sizable supplies of gravel from inland riverbeds. The Nabouwalu-Dreketi road on northern Vanua Levu was completed in late 2015, a F\$228 million project requiring construction of fourteen bridges (*Fiji Sun*, 31 Dec 2015).

The costs of Chinese assistance are difficult to assess. Competition from subsidized Chinese fishing vessels has decimated the Fiji fishing fleet, 75 percent of which is reported as having ceased operations over the past five years (*Fiji Sun*, 26 Sept 2015). Nevertheless, some of the established industry players have survived by moving both up and down the supply chain. Fiji Fish Chief Executive Graham Southwick pointed out that “ironically, we make good money from the very boats that are causing us problems: all the Taiwanese and Chinese boats. We have 55 boats supplying fish to us that we trade, and we sell fuel and bait to these boats and service the whole fleet. The money we make from this supports our own fleet. . . .

If we had to rely solely on our own boats we would have shut down” (*Fiji Sun*, 28 Dec 2015). With regard to its own oceangoing activities, Fiji Fish has diversified out of tuna to concentrate on snapper, mahimahi, and other higher-value fisheries exports.

The Bainimarama government has cultivated diplomatic relations with other nontraditional partners. Fiji now has nineteen missions abroad, including posts in the Republic of Korea, Brazil, and United Arab Emirates, costing the country F\$42 million per annum (*Fiji Times*, 28 Dec 2015). New relationships entail a variety of trade-offs. In January 2016, twenty-five shipping containers arrived in Suva from Russia, carrying weapons, ammunition, and trucks for Fiji's peacekeepers serving in Egypt's Sinai desert and along the Israel-Syria frontier on the Golan Heights. Ahead of their deployment, Bainimarama had brokered a 2013 deal with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to supply the new equipment. In 2014, Fiji abstained from voting on the United Nations motion condemning Russia's occupation of the Crimea.

The year 2015 was one of cults and invective but also one of tentative signs of political reconfiguration. As it drew to a close, the *Fiji Sun* gave Bainimarama their “man of the year” prize yet again and filled its pages with fawning celebrations of “our first true people's prime minister” (*Fiji Sun*, 31 Dec 2015). Letters to the *Fiji Times* likewise applauded the “high power” of the prime minister (*Fiji Times*, 27 Dec 2015). Counter-cults in Nadroga and Ra had betrayed an inward-looking indigenous response of seeking to breakaway from the central

state. The trading of obscenities inside Parliament showed just how personalized the power struggle remained after eight years of rule by decree but also signaled that the Opposition was struggling to respond to Fiji-First's developmental agenda. On the other hand, the FijiFirst government had not adjusted easily to civilian rule nor relinquished its authoritarian proclivities. Oddly, as Fiji entered its tenth year since the 2006 coup, Bainimarama's government was looking ever more like that of his arch-nemesis, Sāmoa's Tuilaepa, with its constraints on the Opposition and the media, its modernist orientation, and its micromanagement of village loyalties.

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TIMOR-LESTE

Bitter divisions within Timor-Leste's small political elite have been a regular feature of post-independence politics. These were aggravated by the political-military crisis of 2006 that saw a breakdown in the security institutions and the fall of the first government, and by acrimonious disputes in the wake of the 2007 and 2012 elections. Remarkably, interparty relations improved dramatically in 2015 with the emergence of a de facto government of national unity between the two major parties, the National Congress of the Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) and the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN). This rapprochement saw an opposition figure appointed as prime minister to facilitate former resistance leader Xanana Gusmão's move to the Ministry of Planning and Strategic Investment. This convergence in Dili's political elite built on a newfound consensus style of politics, evident since 2013. But behind the political stability and slowly improving development indicators lay deeper questions of sustainability, with finite petroleum resources under pressure from large budget expenditures, and a demographic bulge of young East Timorese about to enter an overstretched labor market. Some concerns were also expressed over the lack of an effective parliamentary