

Political Reviews

The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2017

NIC MACLELLAN

Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2017

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FIJI

Contemporary political events and issues in Fiji, especially in the period between 1987 and 2017, can be understood most fully by analyzing the dynamics of ongoing power rivalry in Fiji. Within this thirty-year period, Fiji has had three military and one civilian/military coups d'état, highlighting modern and customary struggles for national leadership. While military and national leadership has remained in the hands of Indigenous Fijian males since 1987, and coup leaders-turned-national leaders have also been Indigenous Fijian males, the reasons for staging coups and for supporting coups have shifted over time. In 1987, Sitiveni Rabuka staged two military coups to return political leadership to Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's Alliance Party. In 2000, George Speight staged a failed coup. However, the ruling Fiji Labour Party Coalition was not returned to power. Frank Bainima-

rama's military coup d'état in 2006 was dubbed as a "cleanup campaign" to rid Fiji of a variety of ills such as corruption and nepotism. Bainimarama's leadership is ongoing, albeit with a number of issues voiced by his opponents.

Fiji's political evolution through all the coup periods has reflected the nature of power rivalry among different elite groups, wherein class and ethnicity merged and also conflicted, raising other problems. National leadership through the militarization of the state saw the enforcement of democracy through the barrel of a gun. Military dictatorships after coups created their own sociopolitical and economic relations, conducive to strengthening their grapples for power. Fiji's political economy between 1987 and 2017 has been driven by these national power contests. These three decades have seen the emergence of politically ambitious military coup leaders, at times supporting the interests of some Indigenous leaders and the business class and at times clashing with these interests. Against this historical background, this review highlights unfolding and ongoing political issues and events in Fiji in 2017.

Fiji's population in the 2017 census was 884,887, reflecting a gradual increase of 47,660 after the 2007 census. The Fijian male population overall was 50.7 percent, surpassing that of the female population at 49.3 percent. Approximately 70 percent of Fiji's population is below the age of 40 (Fiji One News, 13 Jan 2018).

The urban population increased to 494,252 or 65.9 percent of the overall population. This was an increase of 10 percent over the last census, when

the urban population was 55.9 percent of the total. Fiji's Bureau of Statistics explained the slow increase in the overall population as due to factors including high outward migration and a decrease in fertility levels. The increase in the urban population may be due also to a number of factors, for instance, the extension of town boundaries and the rural-to-urban drift due to the availability of schools, health-care facilities, and employment in the urban areas (Fiji One News, 13 Jan 2018). An unstated but real factor that causes rural-to-urban drift in less-industrialized countries like Fiji is the lack of development in the rural and remote areas or in isolated islands.

As a consequence of urban migration, the populations of some provinces in Fiji were on the decline in 2017. This included the two eastern maritime provinces of Lau and Lomaiviti as well as Macuata on Vanua Levu, Fiji's second-largest island. A decline in rural population may also be attributed to a lack of infrastructure development in the rural areas, especially in the maritime provinces, where shipping has always been irregular. As a result, the main island of Viti Levu, where most towns are located and where most development occurs, has approximately 600,000 inhabitants or 70 percent of the overall population. Another key factor that contributed to the decrease in population in provinces like Macuata was the nonrenewal of sugarcane leases from 1990 onward (Lal, Lim-Applegate, and Reddy 2001).

The nonrenewal of leases caused Indo-Fijian farmers either to migrate to Viti Levu or to leave Fiji and

migrate overseas. The land issue has been a long-standing one in Fiji ever since the British colonial government prevented the alienation of native lands. Indigenous Fijians still own approximately 83 percent of land in the country and, since the coups in 1987, fear of losing land and resources has been a main tenet that unites Indigenous Fijians under some of their mainstream political parties.

It is clear that one of the major factors enabling the survival of military dictatorships in Fiji is the creation of laws and decrees that protect the interests of such regimes. For example, one of the provisions in Rabuka's 1990 constitution protected his coup perpetrators; this was finally repealed in 1997 after the stabilization of his rule. After the fourth military coup in 2006, Bainimarama's military government repealed the 1997 constitution after the Appeals Court in Fiji ruled on 10 April 2009 that the Bainimarama coup was illegal (Jowitt 2009). In 2013, the Bainimarama government promulgated yet another new constitution. In addition to the constitutional provision that protected the 2006 coup perpetrators, critics have pointed to other decrees that are contradictory to democracy in Fiji.

Fiji's Media Industry and Development Decree of 2010 is one such instance; it was still in existence in January 2017 and since its promulgation, it has been consistent in silencing critics of the current government. This decree has seen the removal of senior officers from their positions in both the public and private sectors. For example, in January 2017, Geoffrey Smith, the chief executive officer of Fiji Television, was forced

to resign from his job. He followed in the footsteps of other colleagues in the same company: his predecessor Tevita Gonelevu and, earlier, Fiji TV's investment specialist, Mesake Nawari. Basically, Fiji TV, under the leadership of these people and others who were also sidelined or sacked, refused to adhere to the requirements of the Fiji First government's media decree (*IB*, Jan 2017, 8–10). (The Fiji First political party was formed by Bainimarama in 2014.)

Censorship of news is one of the major tactics still used by the Bainimarama government to keep Fiji's people ignorant about crucial happenings in Fiji. In early 2016, Professor Biman Prasad, leader of the National Federation Party (NFP), spoke to this ongoing issue: "Media organisations operate under the threat of their editors being hauled before the Media Tribunal and subjected to huge fines and other punishments. The lack of access to a free and independent media has been the single most frustrating obstacle for the opposition parties when they try to make the Government publicly accountable on various national issues" (Prasad 2016).

Critiquing the newly introduced laws or amendments to laws by the current government in Fiji has also resulted in drastic measures, including deportation. In December 2016, Karen Seaton, a foreigner (US/Canadian) and freehold landowner on an island in Fiji, was deported after she appeared before a parliamentary committee to lobby for support against Fiji's amendment to a land sales regulation (*IB*, Jan 2017, 16). Section 7 of the amendment stated: "Current non-resident owners of vacant lots within

or outside of town/city boundaries are required to complete construction of a new residential dwelling, with a minimum expenditure of F\$250,000, by 31 December 2016” (Munro Ley’s Law 2014). The complaint by Seaton and members of the Fiji Landowners Association was based on the fact that they were already landowners before the amendment was first introduced in 2014. They argued that the amendment was wrong in principle as it treated everyone alike, making no provisions for old owners (*IB*, Jan 2017, 16). There was no avenue to reconsider the Fiji Landowner’s Association complaint.

The Media Industry and Development Decree has also been successful in keeping Fijians ignorant about the extent of China’s influence in Fiji. For example, Chinese police arrived in Fiji in 2017 to remove seventy-seven Chinese citizens who were alleged to have committed cyber-crime and credit card fraud in Fiji. Except for a brief commentary in *Islands Business*, this news was not covered by other media companies in Fiji (*IB*, Sept 2017, 6). The main issue here is that the Chinese criminals were never charged in any court in Fiji, defying Fiji’s sovereignty as an independent state with its own judiciary system.

China has been a willing aid donor to Fiji’s military governments ever since Rabuka’s coup in 1987, and Chinese aid to Fiji intensified after Bainimarama’s 2006 military coup. Fiji’s need for Chinese aid intensified as China, unlike Fiji’s Western allies, did not demand adherence to democratic principles as a prerequisite to aid delivery. Aid to small islands and military dictatorships like Fiji becomes

problematic when it is used to perpetuate the rule of governments that violate and suppress human rights.

Fiji’s civil servants feel very insecure under the current government since the February 2016 introduction of the Open Merit Recruitment and Selection (OMRS) guidelines, whereby a civil servant can be immediately terminated if “they are not doing well.” Minister for Economy and Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum argued in September 2017 that when civil servants are removed from their jobs, they should know they are not doing their jobs well (Nasiko 2017). Civil servants can no longer appeal to have their cases heard, as was previously practiced in Fiji’s Public Service Commission (PSC). In 2016, NFP’s Biman Prasad predicted that the reform of Fiji’s civil service by removing the PSC and creating a Ministry of Civil Service would be disastrous in the long term (Prasad 2016).

Additionally, senior government positions such as those of ministerial permanent secretaries have been opened up to foreign nationals. This issue was raised by Fiji’s former Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs and also former Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates Robyn Nair in 2017. Nair argued that the opening up of the permanent secretary posts to foreign nationals did not look good for Fiji in a number of ways. First, it may imply that, after so many decades of independence (since 1970), Fiji still could not produce a caliber of local senior civil servants to be permanent secretaries in government ministries. Second, the government of the day through its ministers interfered a lot in the hiring and firing of permanent

secretaries. Third, hiring foreign nationals made Fiji civil servants feel insecure regarding their career path in their own government and country (Nair 2017). Perhaps another crucial question that should be posed is whether other democracies around the world allow noncitizens to work in senior civil service positions where they are privy to classified government information.

In my 2017 research on “Untold Stories of Fiji’s 2006 Coup Victims,” I interviewed a former senior Fijian civil servant and information technology (IT) professional who now lives abroad (interview, 25 Oct 2017). He was removed from his position as head of the Fiji Government IT systems and IT networks, in which he was tasked with looking after the following: systems for government payroll; financial management information; the Fiji land information; births, deaths, and marriages; immigration; e-government; the bureau of statistics, and the government IT network including satellite stations and election systems. These responsibilities were transferred to an IT company based in India, which operates in conjunction with a Fiji-based company called Pacific Technologies. Again, the crucial question that is asked here is not only whether government’s classified information is still safe but also how and why international companies are able to move in to take over jobs from qualified locals, even in the civil service.

Promises by politicians for a better government to improve things for Fiji’s people intensified in 2017. Over time, the Bainimarama government has become unpopular among a section of Indigenous Fijian voters.

Social media carry a lot of Indigenous Fijian grievances against the Fiji First government (Fiji Exposed Forum 2018; Fiji Native and Tribal Congress 2018). Dissatisfaction in Indigenous Fijian leadership in Parliament has resulted in yet another search for an Indigenous leader to head the leading opposition party, the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA).

Among a portion of Indigenous Fijian voters, there seems to be a genuine belief that a former military man and former coup leader can end the leadership of another former coup leader. In 2017, former military coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka took over SODELPA leadership from the current party leader, high chiefess Ro Teimumu Kepa, who is also the current opposition leader in the Fiji Parliament. Kepa announced she was not contesting the 2018 Fiji general elections (*IB*, Feb 2017, 8–10). From the time of Rabuka’s appointment in 2017, there are currently two leaders for this party, Kepa as the SODELPA parliamentary leader and Rabuka, who is hoping to be elected to Parliament in the 2018 elections.

Rabuka, Fiji’s first coup leader, defeated two other candidates for the leadership of SODELPA in 2017. A unique characteristic of mainstream Indigenous Fijian political parties has been ongoing name changes. SODELPA evolved from the Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) Party, which had been ousted by the Bainimarama coup in 2006. Prior to the formation of the SDL party in 2001, Rabuka’s first party, the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) party, had been formed in 1991 to replace the Fijian Association arm of Ratu Mara’s Alliance Party

(Durutalo 2006, 296–297). While the name of the party changes in different election periods, the ideology of these mainstream Indigenous Fijian political parties remains the same. One of the main philosophies of these parties has been the protection of Indigenous Fijian resources and rights.

Although Fiji now has only one constituency throughout the whole island group, Rabuka, in an effort to consolidate his power base for the 2018 elections, has been visiting his old SVT branches in his old constituency and home province of Cakaudrove (*IB*, Feb 2017, 8–9). Modern elections in Fiji and in other Pacific Island countries see politicians utilize their kinship and traditional cultural system to build power bases. Other Indigenous politicians have also used the same strategy by appealing to their kin in their provinces and vanua (traditional geopolitical boundary where a high chief rules). However, the campaign challenge in a one-constituency electoral system is to defeat the dominant political party, which in Fiji's case is Prime Minister Bainimarama's Fiji First Party, which did a lot of vote buying before the 2014 elections (Durutalo 2016, 108–110). Although Bainimarama secured the highest number of votes (202,459) in the 2014 elections, only 84 percent of the registered 703,691 voters cast their votes. About 16 percent or 112,590 voters did not vote. Rabuka is targeting those nonvoters in the 2018 Fiji general elections (*IB*, Feb 2017, 9). A test of popularity for Rabuka will be whether or not he secures a seat in Fiji's Parliament in the 2018 elections.

One of the biggest challenges required in an effort to keep the Fiji

economy afloat is for government to attract investors to engage in economically and environmentally sustainable investments in Fiji. Mining continued to attract foreign investment in Fiji in 2017, even though earlier mining activities such as Chinese bauxite mining in Nawailevu, Bua Province, has not been environmentally friendly. In 2015, a high chief from the province stated that the type of mining activity in Bua “should never be repeated in any other part of Fiji.” The chief, who was interviewed by Radio New Zealand, stated: “The villagers told me that they had agreed that the people mine bauxite but later they realised that they were cutting soil onto the boats that sailed to China. There was no machinery in Nawailevu to refine, to take away the bauxite from the soil so they took the whole soil, tonnes and tonnes” (Radio New Zealand 2015). The villagers near the mining site also reported that fish turned a different color when mining was ongoing.

In March 2017, similar concerns were raised as Dome Gold Mines, an Australian mining company, started its first of three mining ventures in Fiji. The first venture, at the mouth of the Sigatoka river in southwest Viti Levu, involves the mining of the seabed to extract magnetized concentrate and iron ore. This Sigatoka riverbed mining venture will then fund two other ventures. The second on Ono island in Kadavu is a gold-mining venture, and the third in the Nadrau plateau in central Viti Levu is a copper-mining venture (*IB*, March 2017, 8–10).

All three ventures are located in “ecologically sensitive and valuable eco-systems” (*IB*, March 2017, 9). For

example, in addition to the fact that many fishermen catch fish around the Sigatoka riverbed area and women collect freshwater mussels from the river, the mining venture is also located in the middle of Fiji's largest tourism area, the Coral Coast. Dome's Sigatoka riverbed venture is also located partially on the Sigatoka sand hills, a heritage site. The gold venture on Ono island in Kadavu is located on world-renowned Great Astrolabe Reef. This is a popular diving site for tourists from all over the world. The Nadrau plateau copper-mining venture is located near the Sovi Basin. This area is already tentatively listed under UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) as a World Heritage site (*IB*, March 2017, 9). In the long term, Fiji's attempt to be the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) champion in mitigating the impact of climate change is directly contradicted by the types of business ventures, like mining, that are ongoing in Fiji.

Climate change is a very complex issue as negotiations to mitigate its impacts transcend the sociopolitical and economic boundaries of all sovereign states, large and small. Additionally, climate change mitigation "begins at home," and SIDS like Fiji need to be conscious of man-made environmental degradation in their own backyards first and foremost before they ask the larger, more industrialized countries to cut down on carbon emissions. Fiji's presidency of COP23 (the UN Climate Change conference) in Bonn, Germany, in November 2017 was met with multidimensional challenges for a small island state in the South Pacific.

At the international level, all

industrialized countries normally take care of the sovereignty of their countries and their economic interests first and foremost. This was clearly demonstrated by the president of the United States when he withdrew from the Paris Agreement. At another level, SIDS in different regions also require the cooperation of their larger neighbors. In the case of SIDS in the Pacific, the cooperation of their First World neighbors, Australia and New Zealand, are very much needed.

As explained by a Pacific negotiator at the COP23 Bonn meeting, there were two parallel meetings that were disconnected. In the "Bula Zone," the details of the Paris Agreement were negotiated. The "Bonn Zone" featured various side events or extracurricular events such as talks, cultural artifact displays, Fijian singing, meke or dancing, and kava drinking (*IB*, Dec 2017, 4). Much of what appeared on the news and social media were the activities in the Bonn Zone, which were not directly connected to high-powered climate change negotiations in the Bula Zone. In fact, the media spotlight on the Bonn Zone distracted attention from the purposes of the COP23 Bonn meeting.

COP23 failed to fulfill the wishes of the Small Islands Developing States in terms of what they had identified and agreed on at a Pacific Climate Champions meeting in Suva in July 2017. For example, issues like loss and damage of islands and homes as well as the rise in ocean levels and the link between oceans and climate change had been discussed at length during that July meeting, but they were marginalized at the Bonn meeting (COP23 2017). Furthermore,

consultants employed to advise the Fijian Presidency negotiating team lacked experience in climate change negotiation. Another observation was the fact that climate change conferences and negotiations should be held in a small island developing state in the Pacific where participants would have a chance to observe firsthand the negative impacts of climate change through, for example, sea-level rise (*IB*, Dec 2017, 4).

Apart from the overwhelming impacts of climate change, Fiji, like other SIDS, confronts its own socio-political and economic realities on a daily basis. Industrial disputes were also part of Fiji's journey in 2017.

On Monday, 6 November 2017, the *Fiji Times* reported a statement by the general secretary of the Federated Airport Services Association at Nadi airport, in western Viti Levu. The statement explained that despite the ongoing discussions with Air Terminal Services (ATS) Management regarding the workers' long-term grievances, the ATS management did not appear to commit to addressing any of the concerns. Among the issues workers wanted resolved was the reinstatement of workers' representatives on the ATS Board. More than 360 out of the 588 workers then opted for strike action because of this impasse (Chaudhary 2017).

On 16 December 2017, an industrial dispute erupted between the ATS Fiji Limited workers, who are 49 percent shareholders of the company, and the management of the company. The Fiji government owns the other 51 percent of the shares. Workers met to discuss long-standing grievances, ongoing for more than ten years.

Approximately 250 ATS workers were locked out of their offices when they attended a three-hour shareholders' meeting. When workers returned to work after their meeting, they found they were locked out of their offices by the ATS management team. Fiji's minister for labor and employment relations, without listening to the facts of the case or taking the industrial dispute to arbitration, ruled the workers meeting as illegal from day one of the lockout. Workers were then immediately told by ATS management to sign a form stating that the workers were in the wrong and, additionally, that the workers were willing to return to work, pending management's decision on the alleged "illegal meeting." The ATS workers refused to sign the form and continued to sit outside the ATS building at Nadi airport, awaiting further negotiations by their union leaders and ATS management.

On Saturday, 13 January 2018, the Fiji Trade Union Congress (FTUC), together with other unions, nongovernmental organizations, political parties, representatives of chiefs and vanua, communities, church groups, and individuals, participated in the largest peaceful protest march in Nadi town. More than eight thousand people participated in this peaceful march in support of the locked-out ATS workers. Prior to this march, Fiji's prime minister had labeled groups that visited the locked-out ATS workers as "cheap politicians" (Bolatiki 2018). However, the message was loud and clear to the Fiji First Government that the workers/shareholders of the company were adamant to continue sitting out until their grievances were heard. After thirty-four days of waiting to be

allowed back into their workplaces, on 20 January 2018, the Employment Relations Tribunal ruled in favor of the ATS workers/shareholders and ordered that locked-out workers be allowed back into their workplaces within forty-eight hours of the ruling. Workers returned to work on Monday, 22 January 2018.

After the ATS workers returned to work, Felix Anthony, the general secretary of the Fiji Trade Union Congress, was interrogated by the Fiji Police about “sabotaging the economy,” which is an offense under section 8 of the Public Order Act in Fiji. As Anthony explained, the Fiji Police suggested that his remarks during the march implied a possibility of a nationwide strike if government did not act to resolve the ATS saga. This, the police asserted, was tantamount to sabotaging Fiji’s economy (Radio New Zealand 2018). Guy Ryder, the director general of the International Labor Organization (ILO), was contacted to intervene urgently on the unfolding industrial dispute in Fiji. The International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITWF) and International Trade Union Confederation said in a statement that “they had no choice but to alert the ILO, and that the government in Fiji must act and stop this unacceptable behaviour,” and, according to ITWF president Paddy Crumlin, “this looks like a process of deliberate intimidation aimed at Felix Anthony and all the workers who stood up for their rights over the ATS lockout” (Radio New Zealand 2018).

Industrial disputes have created their own political dynamics in Fiji’s political history throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods. In

1987, the seventeen-year reign of Ratu Mara’s Alliance Party ended when the newly formed Fiji Labour Party Coalition defeated it. A march through Nadi town on 13 January 2018 by more than eight thousand workers and supporters in a show of solidarity for the locked-out ATS workers was a warning sign to Bainimarama’s Fiji First government that history could repeat itself in the 2018 election. Labour solidarity has always crossed the ethnic divide and made political history in Fiji.

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NEW CALEDONIA

The year 2017 was said to be the last useful year to promote a calm and consensual completion of the Nouméa Agreement before the 2018 referendum on independence. It has indeed seemed to be a transitional year. The previous year of 2016, which was a preelection year in metropolitan France, revealed some key events related to the collapse of the nickel price, which put the three nickel plants in New Caledonia—the Le Nickel Society (SLN) in Nouméa, Vale in the South, and the Northern Province plant of Glencore—and the upstream mining activity at risk. The nickel industry accounts for a quarter of private-sector employment in the country and 90 percent of its exports (Delamarche 2016c). The country is footing the bill for the increase in building costs and low local competitiveness. During his trip to New Caledonia, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls announced a €200 million loan for the Société Territoriale Calédonienne de Participations Industrielles (STCPI, the holding company run by the three provinces of New Caledonia, which holds a 34 percent minority share of the SLN) (Delamarche 2016a). (€1 million = US\$1.2 million.) In November, Prime Minister Valls announced strong financial support for the Vale Plant, as he had done in April 2016 for the SLN. To prevent its possible closure, Valls pledged a €200 million loan and an additional financial guarantee for €220 million (Delamarche 2016b). The situation of the Northern plant was still to be resolved. In November 2016, the French government announced that