

# The future of our past

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January 1990. Fear and uncertainty stalk the country. The 1988 Sunday Observance Decree is in force, restricting recreational, sporting and nonessential activities. Public transport, shops, hotels, restaurants and cinemas operate on strict schedule. One can buy gas at gas stations, but not soft drink. Cremation requires a special police permit. Hindu and Muslim places of worship are torched and desecrated around the country, causing anguish and anger among citizens of all faiths opposed to the recent emergence of religious bigotry. The fragile fabric of multiculturalism is frayed at the edges. Cross-ethnic friendships formed over many years of working and living together are being tested. Divisions and suspicions run deep in a country already divided by culture, history, religion and language. Race as a 'fact' of life is on its way to becoming a 'way' of life.

The economy is teetering on the brink of collapse. Investor confidence has vanished, tourism is down, and capital is flying out of the country through dubious joint ventures and outright bribery. Fijian leaders, stunned by the strong condemnation of the coups by Australia and New Zealand, are exploring new trading and investment links in the Asian region. There is some success. Japanese companies are buying up big hotels and investing in resource-rich fisheries and timber industries. Malaysia has secured sole-source rights to supply Fiji's petroleum needs, and its Borneo Finance Group has begun a joint venture with the government-owned National Bank of Fiji. A Korean company is starting a citrus factory at Batiri in Vanua Levu. New tax-free zones have been established, giving companies exporting the bulk of their products lucrative long-term tax holidays and other preferential inducements.

There is no constitutional government in the country, which is run instead by an interim, unelected administration of former Alliance parliamentarians and other experienced technocrats. The 1970

(Independence) Constitution was overthrown in October 1987 when Sitiveni Rabuka declared Fiji a republic, severing the country's link to the Crown and the Commonwealth. Early efforts to restore Fiji to constitutional normalcy have come to nought, their stillborn reports gathering dust on the shelves. In September 1988, the interim cabinet set up a seventeen-member Constitution inquiry and advisory committee to recommend to the cabinet a Constitution which would '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.'

The committee consults the public in far from ideal circumstances. Freedom of movement and speech are restricted, symbolised powerfully by the presence of the security forces on the streets and roadblocks around the country. Its report recommends the political entrenchment of Fijian paramountcy through increased Fijian numbers in parliament, effective influence over recruitment and promotion in the public service and racially-weighted affirmative programs. Fijians will feel secure only if they dominate the parliament, the report argues. One side of the political and ethnic divide applauds the committee's vision for its cultural and political sensitivity to the aspirations of the indigenous community, while those on the other side reject it as myopic and counterproductive, an affront to values of human dignity and equality. Nonetheless, the committee's report forms the basis of the Constitution the president decrees on 25 July 1990. But the new Constitution is a deeply contested document. Its proponents want its permanent entrenchment while its opponents want it rejected outright. There is no middle ground. Fiji seems stranded in a cul-de-sac, a prisoner of its past. Emotions are high on both sides, the prospects of an amicable reconciliation bleak. No one knows when or if the country will be able to return to a semblance of its pre-coup normalcy.

January 1999. The East Asian boom, with all its promise of aid and investment, has gone bust and, with it, the ever implausible hope of an Asian-inspired economic miracle for Fiji. Traditional economic and diplomatic ties with neighbouring countries have been restored. Common sense and economic realities ensured that. The Sunday Decree now seems like a bad dream, as people laugh and play and work (and pray) freely on the day of the Sabbath. Freedom of movement and speech have returned. The much-predicted civil strife and upheaval, even a racial bloodbath, have mercifully not materialised. The 1990 Constitution, a source of much of the tension, has been replaced by another, more inclusive document, which itself is based substantially on the report of an independent, parliament-appointed Constitution review commission. Not perfect by any means—there is no such thing in existence anywhere—the new Constitution points Fiji to a new direction, toward inclusive, multiracial democracy which is respectful of international instruments on human, civil and political rights.

The journey has by no means been easy; there have been hiccups and detours along the way, and there are many pitfalls ahead. Still, Fiji has achieved an outcome few would have predicted in 1990.

Sitiveni Rabuka has been the man of the moment in Fijian politics over the last decade. In 1990, he was still in the army but his presence loomed menacingly on the national stage. He was slowly beginning to see himself as a man of destiny, a guardian of not only Fijian but of the national interest as well. In 1991, he left the army for a political career, and there was no turning back for him. The broadening experience of national public life was beginning to transform the once narrowly focused soldier into a leader with an awareness of wider obligations and responsibilities. In his contribution to this book, Rabuka tells his own story of growth and change. It is a partial account, to be sure, a glossy retrospective designed to accentuate his role and rationalise his actions; but it is no less valuable for that. Rabuka's recollections are also valuable for his account of his improbable but remarkably fruitful rapport with Jai Ram Reddy, the Indo-Fijian leader, who also deserves credit for his role in national reconciliation.

In May 1999, Fiji went to the polls under the new Constitution, producing a historic result. Four essays in this volume (Lal, Norton, Durutalo and Teiawa) examine the election from a variety of perspectives. I emphasise 'variety' because an event such as an election in an ethnically divided society is always susceptible to multiple readings and conflicting interpretations. Nor, as editor, have I sought to impose any political or ideological 'spin' of my own. The pieces stand on their own, focused around the politics and the outcome of the elections, enabling the careful reader to make up her or his own mind. I provide a 'global' perspective on the issues and the politics of coalitions and of the campaigning which influenced the final outcome. Norton places the voting figures under microscopic scrutiny to read their implication for national political behaviour. He shows convincingly the increased Fijian support for the Fiji Labour Party in direct votes as well as through the preferences of its Fijian allies. But he also cautions that the 'interethnic convergence in shared material interests has ambiguous political implications. It brings the possibility of intensified ethnic conflict no less than a prospect for unity' (Norton Chapter 4:50).

Alumita Durutalo and Teresia Teaiwa alert the reader to issues which have not always received the attention they deserve. Durutalo provides, from a particular angle, an insight into the inner dynamics and subterranean undercurrents of indigenous Fijian politics. Class considerations and regional interests feature more prominently in Fijian political calculations than most outsiders often realise, issues which the colonially created myth of Fijian cultural unity strove to hide, she argues. Teaiwa's contribution on the politics of ambivalence on Rabi shows from close range how a small minority, on the margins of the nation's political consciousness, apprehends

an event over which it has little influence but whose outcome will nonetheless determine its future.

The next four contributions remind us of other challenges which lie ahead for Fiji. Padma Lal looks at the future of the sugar industry, which contributes about F\$230 million or about 43 per cent of the value of Fiji's agricultural production and around 40 per cent of the country's total export earnings. But the industry faces an uncertain future—preferential access under the Sugar Protocol of the Lomé Convention will have to be negotiated. The leases on which most of the sugar cane is grown are expiring and it is uncertain on what terms they will be renewed, if they are renewed at all. And then there are the problems of internal restructuring of the industry to reduce costs and increase productivity. Padma Lal identifies and discusses the policies needed to address these and other concerns, emphasising the importance of multidisciplinary research to underpin policy decisions. Joeli Veitayaki looks at the issues facing another major resource sector in Fiji: the inshore fisheries. He discusses the fate of previous government strategies to develop this sector and identifies the reasons for their failure. He is blunt in his prognosis. 'Government intervention' he says, 'should be selective and must recognise as its ultimate objective the handing over of all commercial functions to the private sector' (Veitayaki Chapter 8:148).

Chandra Reddy, herself a notable public figure in Fiji, alerts us to the challenges and adversities facing women in Fiji, and social attitudes and values which included 'very distinct and different social responsibilities assigned to men and women,' effects of the 'deeply rooted patriarchal systems in Fiji in which women are always relegated to the background,' and the 'result of religious and cultural attitudes that restricted and discouraged the potential contributions that women could make in positions of leadership' (Reddy Chapter 9:150). The situation has improved somewhat in recent years, and Reddy identifies the steps the Rabuka government planned to take to improve the lot of women. But there is still a long way to go, argues Reddy, in reforming attitudes and values that consign women to the subordinate sectors of Fiji society. In the final chapter, Biman Prasad identifies the economic challenges facing the new government. The new government has whetted the people's appetite for change, but its real challenge, Biman argues, will be to deliver on its state-backed social and economic promises within the context of increasing globalisation of the world economy.

The People's Coalition government was in power for a year when it was ousted in a coup by George Speight. Despite some notable achievements the government did not enjoy a smooth passage into office. It was beset with teething problems common to all new, inexperienced administrations. The problems were compounded for the Chaudhry cabinet which was not only new and inexperienced but also exceptionally weak. It

was learning the responsibilities and challenges of government as it went along, on the job, with all the hiccups that the learning process involved. Its counterproductive tussle with the media was a case in point. The government saw the media as insensitive, arrogant and aiding the cause of its opponents (*Sunday Times* 28 August 1999). For its part, the media saw the government's attack as part of a strategy to divert attention away from the problems it was facing (*Fiji Times* 16 August 1999). Its handling of the issue of work permits for 'expatriate' workers in Fiji was another. Preference for locals is understandable, but as Mark Halabe, a garment manufacturer, put it, 'I don't enjoy financially hiring an expatriate manager but I would rather do that for the success of my business rather than hire somebody cheap who will destroy my company' (*Fiji Times* 22 July 1999).

The lack of political discipline among Labour's coalition partners was another problem for the government. The governing coalition comprised a number of parties with agendas and ambitions of their own, thrown together by a confluence of unlikely events rather than a deep sharing of a common platform. Some friction in the early stages was to be expected, but not active hostility. The Party of National Unity had two members in the cabinet, but the party leaders were among the government's strongest and most hostile critics and bitterly opposed to its policies, especially on land. Apisai Tora, multiracialist among other things, publicly opposed the idea of an Indo-Fijian as prime minister (*fijilive* 23 August 1999). Tora was subsequently removed as the head of the party, but he would re-emerge in another guise. Even some Fijian Association Party's members of parliament not in cabinet, spoke against the government. The effort to oust Adi Kuini Bavadra Speed as leader of the party was part of the strategy to destabilise the coalition and to harden Fijian feelings against it. The Veitokani Ni Lewenivanua Vakaristo (VLV) publicly rebuked the government over its handling of the expatriate work permit issue (*fijilive* 23 July 1999).

Saimone Kaitani's call for all Fijian parties in parliament to unite to oust the government, through protest marches and violence, suggested that he had not learnt the lessons of Fiji's recent political history. A spokesperson for the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) put it this way: 'It is important for the general public to know that the indigenous people are not happy with the present state of affairs. People don't really care that there was a democratically elected government under the 1997 Constitution that was duly formed after the May elections. The bottom line is that the bulk of the Fijians do not like being led by an Indian. If we are going to screw up then we'd rather screw up on our own, without another race's help. We're both capable of screwing up, but we think we'd rather do it on our own' (*fijilive* 3 October 1999).

'Screwing up' is what Fijians opposed to the government began planning. Protest marches began in a small way, haphazard and

disorganised until they came under the banner of a revived Taukei Movement led by Apisai Tora. Fijian civil servants and others grumbled about being marginalised; some feared exposure for incompetence or mismanagement; and some were worried their 'natural' right to accelerated promotion would be thwarted. They all joined the bandwagon opposed to the government. They achieved their goal of ousting the Chaudhry government on its first anniversary on 19 May 2000. The story of Fiji after that momentarily tragic event will require another telling, although I have included an analysis of the Speight coups in this book with the knowledge that I do no more than scratch the surface. This book deals with events before the coup. Its principal significance is its historical value, a text which will have to be read to understand why things went wrong in Fiji, why yet another turning point was missed.