

The State of Democracy in Fiji

Written by Stephanie Lawson

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STEPHANIE LAWSON, DEC 2 2015

Since independence in 1970, Fiji has experienced a cycle of elections followed by coups followed by new constitutions, followed by fresh elections. The last coup in 2006, dubbed by its leader, Commodore Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama) as the 'coup to end all coups', was followed by the longest period yet of military rule with a new constitution promulgated only in 2013 and general elections following in 2014. These developments saw the return of Bainimarama as a democratically elected Prime Minister at the head of his newly formed political party, FijiFirst, with approximately 60% of the popular vote. This was also achieved under an electoral system that retained no trace of the communalism that had characterised all previous systems and which had, arguably, been at the heart of Fiji's chronic political instability.

Much of the debate about democracy and constitutional design in Fiji over the years has been configured around ethnic or racial identity – that is, 'communal' issues – especially between the two major population groups: indigenous Fijians (commonly called Taukei) who constitute about 58% of the total population of approximately 840,000, and those descended from Indian immigrants who make up around 37%. Respect for democratic constitutionalism has been very thin on the ground with many, especially among Taukei, supporting democracy only when it delivered power to a political party seen as favouring their special interests, and repudiating it almost entirely when power went instead to an opposing group. By 2014, however, communal politics appeared to have taken a back seat to Bainimarama's 'modernist' ideology underpinned by a strong developmentalist agenda as well as a determination to eliminate the influence of the traditional chiefly system in national politics as well as Taukei nationalist elements in the Methodist Church who had played a leading role in stoking the fires of communalism. These and related issues must be understood against the background of colonial rule in Fiji which effectively institutionalised communal politics well before independence.

The Colonial Legacy

From the earliest days of colonial rule a doctrine of 'indigenous paramountcy' was developed, initially to protect Taukei from exploitation by European settlers, especially in relation to land. But the perception of threat was soon transferred to the Indian population which, ironically, had been imported as cheap labour for the plantation economy in the early days of colonial rule precisely to preserve the Taukei 'way of life' from disruption through employment as plantation labour.

Under the colonial system, Indians were kept socially and economically separated from Taukei, again partly in the interests of preserving the latter's traditional order which of course included control by traditional chiefs. An entire system of separate Taukei governance was instituted with a Great Council of Chiefs at its apex. The latter, along with a number of other official positions, had not existed at the time of colonisation but quickly became part of a powerful neo-traditional order which thrived under the colonial regime.

Adding to the sense of differentiation from the Indian community was religious affiliation. Under missionary influence, virtually all Taukei had converted to Christianity while Indians were mainly Hindu with smaller numbers being Muslim and even fewer Christians. Although many Christian denominations have come to be represented in Fiji, around two-thirds of the Taukei population identify as Methodists, reflecting the legacy of Methodist missionary influence in the colonial period.

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Another key feature of the colonial system was the development of separate communal electoral rolls. European males were the first to be enfranchised to elect representatives to the colonial legislature while Taukei were represented by selected (non-elected) traditional chiefs. When Indians were enfranchised they were kept on separate electoral rolls and voted only for candidates from the Indian community. In the lead-up to independence in the 1960s, all citizens were enfranchised, but communal electoral rolls, and electorates, were maintained. This remained the case into independence, albeit with some provision for 'cross-voting'. Even so, the electoral system determined fixed numbers to be returned from each communal group.

Communalism and Coups in Independent Fiji

One certain result of a communally-based electoral system is communally-oriented politics and this became the clear pattern of politics from before independence up until the 2006 elections, with some departures. The first departure of real significance came in the 1987 elections when a coalition composed of a broader range of interests, stemming in part from the trade union movement and encompassing all communal groups, defeated the incumbent Alliance government. The latter, which had held power since independence under the leadership of one of Fiji's highest traditional chiefs, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, had represented itself as the only party capable of safeguarding Taukei interests in the face of threats ostensibly posed by the 'Indian-dominated' coalition, although the latter was in fact also led by an indigenous Fijian, albeit one without chiefly status. Taukei rights were also triply entrenched in the 1970 constitution and could not have been changed by the new government, even if it had wished to.

The alleged threat to Taukei interests posed by the new government, however, especially to land and the status of the chiefly system, soon saw a Taukei nationalist movement mobilise against it and threatening violence and disorder. Leading Alliance figures, including Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, ungracious in defeat, failed to concede the legitimacy of the newly elected government, as distinct from its technical legality. They also failed to condemn the increasingly threatening behaviour of the Taukei nationalists.

Within six weeks of the elections, Fiji's first coup was led by the third-ranking officer of the Royal Fiji Military Forces, Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. The coup was justified on the grounds that Taukei rights and interests were under threat from the new government, and that public safety was being compromised by the nationalist Taukei movement. It is notable that the security forces were deployed not to contain the threat emanating from the latter group, but rather to destroy the government. It is also notable that the military was (and remains) almost 100% indigenous Fijian.

Rabuka soon put in place an interim civilian administration, but found it insufficiently attuned to his nationalist agenda and so led a second coup a few months later after which he abrogated the constitution and declared Fiji a republic. A new constitution was promulgated in 1990, entrenching a far more rigid communal system, favouring conservative Taukei rural constituencies over urban ones, and thoroughly marginalising Indo-Fijians politically. Indeed, governments could now be formed without the support of a single Indo-Fijian voter.

Many Indo-Fijians found emigration to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, and other destinations a more attractive prospect than life under a system of political apartheid. But Taukei found that almost absolute political supremacy did not deliver a more settled polity or a better life for most Taukei. Rather, rivalries among Taukei groups simply multiplied and escalated, revealing that there was much more to politics in Fiji than a simplistic interpretation of Taukei versus Indo-Fijian interests implied. International condemnation, suspension from the Commonwealth and limited aid flows added to pressures for change. Former coup leader Rabuka transformed himself into a civilian politician and reformed nationalist, and soon backed constitutional review that produced a constitution for the 'Republic of the Fiji Islands' in 1997 which allowed Indo-Fijians a much more equitable role in national politics. But under pressure from conservative Taukei, it retained provisions for communal voting, thus ensuring the continuation of communal politics.

At the same time, however, divisions among Taukei political interests remained and elections in 1999, as in 1987, brought to power a coalition of parties with both Indo-Fijian and Taukei components, but this time headed by an Indo-Fijian. And again, this was depicted by defeated conservative Taukei leaders as an 'Indian-dominated' government

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that would undermine a range of indigenous rights and interests. Beyond this, the fact the prime ministership was held by an Indo-Fijian was simply unacceptable to indigenous nationalists.

In May 2000, nationalists celebrated (and rioted) in the streets when a part-Taukei civilian, together with a small number of military personnel, decided to assume the role of savior of the Taukei by taking the government hostage in the parliamentary compound for 56 days. However, the head of Fiji's military forces at this time, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, did not support the coup and although he stepped in and imposed martial law in the absence of any effective government, it was clear that he would not support Speight as head of a new government, even an interim one. Instead, negotiations saw Laisenia Qarase, both an arch-nationalist and a traditionalist (although not himself holding chiefly status) installed as interim prime minister in a civilian administration pending fresh elections. Speight himself was granted an amnesty but he soon broke its terms, was arrested, convicted of treason and is now serving a life term. Qarase was subsequently elected prime minister in 2001 on a nationalist agenda.

In the meantime, certain developments within the military were to have significant implications for the personal relationship between Bainimarama and Qarase. An attempted mutiny led by a small number of officers occurred in December 2000 which aimed to assassinate Bainimarama and to free Speight. The rebels came close to killing Bainimarama but were defeated by loyalists. This was almost certainly the key turning point for Bainimarama personally and drew him and the military to the centre of the political stage. Bainimarama became implacably opposed to the entire nationalist agenda and all those associated with it. To the extent that Qarase was clearly ideologically aligned with the nationalist cause, sympathetic to the coup perpetrators and, by implication, to Bainimarama's would-be assassins, the scene was set for a very turbulent period in politics.

Political Change under the Bainimarama Regime

In the lead-up to the 2006 election, Bainimarama's behaviour became increasingly threatening towards the Qarase government. For their part, the government had attempted (but failed) to replace Bainimarama as military leader, thus intensifying the enmity. When in May 2006 the Qarase government was returned to power on an explicitly Taukei nationalist platform, Bainimarama simply would not accept the verdict of the polls. He continued campaigning against the government, accusing them of corruption, mismanagement and of an insidious racism which, he declared, was the single greatest threat to the future of Fiji's prosperity as a nation. Although the Qarase government, clearly fearful of the military, made considerable concessions in terms of policy on a range of issues, events showed that Bainimarama was not to be appeased. In December 2006, he led Fiji's fourth coup under a highly spurious interpretation of a 'doctrine of necessity'.

It was to be eight years before Fiji returned to electoral democracy and, in that period, Bainimarama does indeed appear to have wrought a major change in political thinking in Fiji, especially among ordinary Taukei voters, the majority of whom clearly backed his FijiFirst party in the 2014 elections, deserting the Taukei nationalist party which had re-formed before the elections under a new leadership, but with a similar agenda. The latter included establishment of a 'Christian state'.

The extraordinary turnaround in Taukei political affiliations, despite continuing appeals to communal prejudices, was due in large measure to the concerted efforts of the Bainimarama regime to bring a significant measure of development to rural and urban communities alike while at the same time maintaining a campaign aimed at persuading Taukei communities in particular of the benefits of moving away from a narrow traditionalist ideology with its racist underpinnings to embrace a modernist agenda in which opportunity was open to all citizens of Fiji. Other measures included the abolition of the Great Council of Chiefs and enforced reform within the Methodist Church.

All this was achieved, however, in an exceptionally heavy-handed way, accompanied by the stifling of any criticism through the media and other institutions. Self-censorship for fear of reprisals continues post-2014, thus compromising the quality of democratic discourse except through the blogosphere which, of course, also permits the continued airing of rabidly racist views.

In addition, the new constitution was simply imposed without any form of public consent. It has to be said, however,

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that had a more democratic process been adopted, it is highly unlikely that such a radically de-racialised electoral system would have been introduced. And it is only through such a system that Fiji will be able to develop a more robust form of democracy that can move away from the destructive dynamics of racist/nationalist politics. It is tempting to conclude that the ends justify the means.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, what can one say about the quality of democracy in Fiji? Certainly, the country can only benefit from the elimination, as far as possible, of an insidious form of communal politics that has wrought so much damage over the years and made almost entirely false promises to ordinary Taukei concerning their future prosperity. And the legal and political equality which all citizens now enjoy is clearly an essential basis on which to build a more democratic polity. But despite all this, the military remains the most powerful institution in Fiji's national politics and, for all the rhetoric about the de-racialisation of politics in the country, it is still almost 100 per cent indigenous. It remains to be seen whether any moves will be made to introduce greater diversity into the military itself which, if achieved, will be a real measure of the success of Fiji's new multicultural democracy. It also remains to be seen whether, if Bainimarama's FijiFirst party is defeated at the polls in the next elections (due in 2018), he will accept the legitimacy of the verdict. It is one thing for him to tolerate the current opposition as an opposition in a parliamentary system. It is another altogether to allow them to become the government. This is the true test of the integrity and strength of democratic constitutionalism which has so far failed so dismally in Fiji.

About the author:

Stephanie Lawson is Professor of Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University, Sydney and Senior Research Associate, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg and Visiting Professor with the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia project at the Australian National University. She has previously worked at the University of New England, the Australian National University, the University of East Anglia, and the University of Birmingham. She is a past president of the Australian Political Studies Association and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. Her publications span comparative and international politics and include a prize-winning book, *The Failure of Democratic Politics in Fiji* (Clarendon Press, 1991). Her most recent book is *Theories of International Relations: Contending Approaches to World Politics* (Polity Press, 2015).