



Pacific Institute  
of Public Policy

# Lending Fiji a hand: The need for international engagement and a national dialogue

## FIJI'S POLITICAL TIME LINE:

- » **10 OCT 1874** Fiji ceded to the British Crown
- » **1879 - 1916** over 60,000 indentured labours brought over from India by the British
- » **1 JUL 1965** constitutional conferences held in London
- » **23 SEP 1966** Fiji's first Constitution enacted and first general election won by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara who becomes Fiji's chief minister
- » **10 OCT 1970** independence from Britain and independent Constitution enacted
- » **29 APR 1972** second general election (first post independence) won by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara
- » **2 APR 1977** third general election won by Siddiq Koya led National Federation Party but unable to form government and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara appointed prime minister by Governor General Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau
- » **17 JUL 1982** fourth general election won by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara
- » **7 APR 1987** fifth general election won by Dr Timoci Bavadra led Fiji Labour Party
- » **14 MAY 1987** coup led by Lt Colonel Sitiveni topples Bavadra's government

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The takeover by the Fijian military leader, Commodore Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama prompted what is arguably now the most important politico-security issue of the South Pacific. The regime has been promising 'real' democracy, of one-person one-vote. But in the process has dismantled the Constitution, judiciary, free press and civil society. In his most recent announcement<sup>1</sup>, the Commodore outlined his 'road map' that would see consultations on a new constitution commence in 2012, implementation of a new constitution by 2013, and 'non-communal, equal suffrage based elections for parliamentary representation by September 2014'. International condemnation of the military government has been loud, most noticeably from Australia and New Zealand. The barrage of criticism is not without some validity, but the policy of international isolation fails the peoples of Fiji and the region. Fiji is in crisis. It is up to all of us as Pacific neighbours to lend a hand. It is simple to condemn outright the sort of dictatorship that Commodore Bainimarama is busy implementing. Calling for an immediate 'return to democracy' seems straightforward. The situation in Fiji is anything but simple or straightforward. Misreading the complexity of the current crisis and its evolution divorces the discourse from reality. The time for tit-for-tat squabbling is over. It is time to help steer Fiji back to its rightful position as a regional leader.

## Looking back to chart a way forward

In noting the "controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years", President Barack Obama acknowledged that each country must be allowed to give life to principles of democracy "in its own way, grounded in the traditions of its own people"<sup>2</sup>. Since independence from Britain in 1970, Fiji has struggled with its own version of democracy. By the 1960s, as preparations were underway for the inevitability of independence, the political landscape that framed constitutional discussions was dominated by indigenous Fijian fears of Indo-Fijian domination<sup>3</sup> (Lal 2006 and Davies 2004). The 1970 Constitution set in place a voting system steeped in racial segregation<sup>4</sup>. It was to be an interim solution to guide the

1. In a speech titled 'A Strategic Framework for Change' delivered in Suva on 1 July, 2009.
2. In a speech titled "A New Beginning" delivered in Cairo, Egypt on 4 June, 2009.
3. A fear based on both demographics (Indo-Fijians were then the majority race) and the rising influence of Indo-Fijians in commercial activities, notably the sugar industry. Over time the demographics have changed and by 2007 the population split was 56.8% indigenous Fijian and 37.5% Indo-Fijian (source: Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics).
4. The 1970 Constitution reserved 22 of the 52 parliamentary seats for indigenous Fijians, 22 for Indians, and 8 for 'general electors' (Europeans, Chinese, and other minorities). Under the 1990 version of the Constitution the Parliament was expanded to 70 seats, of which had 37 were reserved for indigenous Fijians, 27 for Indo-Fijians and 6 for 'general electors'. The 1997 version divided the now 71 seats of parliament between 25 elected by universal suffrage and 46 reserved as follows: 23 seats for indigenous Fijians, 19 Indo-Fijians, 1 Rotuman, and 3 "General electors".

Briefing:  
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July, 2009

first general election and be reviewed<sup>5</sup> thereafter (Lal 2006). The original Constitution also gave the Bose Levu Vakaturaga (or Great Council of Chiefs) a power of veto over all legislation that affected indigenous Fijian interests and concerns. The scene was set by the outgoing British powers and the chiefly elite to preserve indigenous Fijian political supremacy for the new nation. The Alliance Party of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara went on to rule the country continuously<sup>6</sup> for the best part of the first two decades. The status quo was first challenged by the 1987 election victory of the Fiji Labour Party (FLP), under the premiership of Dr Timoci Bavadra, an indigenous Fijian, and the subsequent two coups led by Lt Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. The chiefly aristocracy were concerned of the rise of Bavadra, a commoner. The Fijian nationalists were concerned about the influence of the Indo-Fijians in the FLP. The business elite was concerned at Labour's promise of improved wages and conditions for workers. Internationally there was concern that Bavadra's new government would enforce a ban on all nuclear ships visiting Fiji – as New Zealand had done under the Lange Labour government – and looked set to adopt a non-aligned foreign policy similar to neighbouring Vanuatu. The militant Taukie Movement, claiming indigenous Fijians would lose their land, launched a concerted destabilisation campaign. Others accused the FLP of being communist and pro-Libya<sup>7</sup>. Rabuka's coups consolidated a return to Alliance-era politics.

The post-coup, interim (non-elected) government drafted the 1990 Constitution 'having regard in particular to the failure of the 1970 Constitution to provide adequate and full protection of the rights, interests and concerns of the indigenous Fijian people'<sup>8</sup>. In order to 'safeguard' the positions of prime minister, president and head of the armed forces, these were reserved for indigenous Fijians. Additionally, indigenous Fijians were guaranteed a majority of seats (37 of 70) in parliament. A system of affirmative action was instituted to promote indigenous Fijians in public office and education.

After nearly five years rule by the interim administration appointed by the then President (formerly Governor General) Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau Fiji went to the polls in May 1992, and Rabuka was returned as prime minister. There ensued a period of division among the elites, including the open rivalry between Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Rabuka, who like Bavadra, was a commoner.

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5. The ruling Alliance Party rejected the findings of the 1975 Royal Commission led by Professor Harry Street, Sir William Hart and Professor Sir Keith Lucas. The Commissioners suggested retaining some of the safe guards of the racial voting system but suggested 25 national seats to be open to a common electoral roll (Lal 2006).

6. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, considered by many to be the founding father of the modern nation of Fiji, served first as Chief Minister (1966 to 1970), then Prime Minister (1970 to 1992, apart from a brief interruption of four days in 1977 and a few months in 1987) and then as President (1993 to 2000).

7. Libya was then active in the South Pacific encouraging the non-aligned movement.

8. Government of Fiji (1988) *Fiji Constitution Inquiry and Advisory Committee Report*, Government Printer, Suva.

A three-man review Commission headed by retired New Zealand Governor General Sir Paul Reeves oversaw the revision of the 1990 Constitution. In 1997, the new Constitution was passed by both Houses of Parliament and approved by the Great Council of Chiefs. It was widely acclaimed by the international community as having addressed the blatant racism of its predecessor. The first election under the revised Constitution was held in 1999 and returned a second Labour party led government, this time under the stewardship of Mahendra Chaudrey, an Indo-Fijian. Fiji's third coup, led by George Speight, unfolded within a year of the new FLP government taking office.

Many saw Speight's attack on the Parliament as not about race, rather a mix of power grab and attempt by a group of business elite (both Indian and indigenous) to secure lucrative government concessions and prevent the introduction of a new minimum wage. Speight's putsch was thwarted by military intervention<sup>9</sup> led by Commodore Bainimarama, which instated an interim civilian government led by Laisenia Qarase. Legitimised by narrow victories in the 2001 and 2006 general elections, Qarase's SDL government was seen by many as busy implementing politically what Speight failed to achieve by force. Once again the race card was played as a smokescreen for other issues, mainly business but also to continue propping up the Fijian oligarchy. The very public falling out between Qarase and Bainimarama culminated in the 2006 coup and current constitutional crisis.

Clearly, Fiji sits on a host of fault lines that have long simmered. Apart from the indigenous Fijian versus Indo-Fijian issue is the east-west rivalry, which sees the more Melanesian west long ruled by the (Polynesian) Tongan-influenced eastern 'kingdoms'. There is spiritual rivalry between the dominant Methodist Church and other faiths including Catholicism, Hinduism and Islam. On top of this is a lingering class struggle, which has united many ordinary workers of all ethnic backgrounds in a sense that they are being exploited by their own elites. Add to the mix a disparate group of individuals, all for diverse reasons, exploiting the tensions and divisions for their own gain.

Four military coups and one civilian attack on the Parliament in 20 years suggests that the system is broken and needs a circuit breaker. Enter Bainimarama. He has broken the mould by calling for a level playing field, by being Catholic, by abolishing the Great Council of Chiefs and attempting to dismantle many of the other institutional power bases, including the Methodist church. Setting aside tactics and motives, Bainimarama's rhetoric of ridding the political system of corruption and racism rings true for many. He rightly claims that to re-organise the gerrymandered electoral system and embrace one-person one-vote will take time. Breaking endemic racism will take a long time.

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9. Some have since labelled Bainimarama's actions a 'counter coup'. On 29 May 2009, ten days after Speight stormed the Parliament, Bainimarama declared himself head of an interim military government, declared martial law and abrogated the (1997) Constitution, which was reinstated following a ruling by the High Court (15 November 2000) that was subsequently upheld by the Fiji Court of Appeal (1 March 2001).

Economic pressures will also compete for attention and risk being a distraction. It is now about sequencing. Get that right and it is possible for Fiji to resume the journey along her rocky road to democracy. International support can help. A national dialogue is essential.

## International engagement

For decades the Australia, New Zealand and US alliance have invested their political capital in making Fiji the hub of the Pacific. The Commodore has pulled the rug from under them. Repeated attempts were made to engage the interim military government through the Pacific Islands Forum and it is clear that Bainimarama's failure to meet with Forum leaders, and his shifting timelines for elections, sorely tested the patience of a few. The decision to suspend Fiji from the Pacific Islands Forum pushed Bainimarama further into a corner, where he increasingly needs to seek support from elsewhere. The suspension may also lead to division within the regional body, with perhaps the rise of sub-regional groups like the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). The idea behind organisations like the Forum and the MSG is to group peoples together, mainly in culture and trade to better foster regionalism and common interests. To suspend a country on the basis of its government seems against the spirit in which these organisations were formed. From a practical point of view, suspension has left the Forum's secretariat in Suva somewhat isolated and with a sense of being under siege, distracting from the many other tasks it is charged with coordinating.

There is also a danger that persistently demonising the Commodore will cast him as hero in some circles. As elsewhere, Pacific islanders admire the tough-guy underdog and tire easily of lectures about 'democracy'. It is a re-occurring element in Melanesian politics that when the grassroots get squeezed by outside forces they bring out the tough guy. Often it is someone who is not necessarily the best leader, but is the one who has stepped forward, in traditional Melanesian 'big-man' style, to act as a fight leader and rally people around him. In Bougainville, decades of complaints about the impact and returns from the Panguna mine were ignored, by the central government, Bougainville politicians and mining company CRA. The man who started the fight was Francis Ona, a rebel leader with no political background whose uncompromising approach won the support of most Bougainvilleans in their struggle for independence. Pressure on land in Guadalcanal in the neighbouring Solomon Islands created the rise of raskol leaders like Harold Keke and Jimmy Rasta. Point being that fault lines in this region, if not addressed through political reforms, will be addressed in more robust ways by big-men and raskols.

Fiji now has Bainimarama not because he is the best man for the job, but because he is the one who has taken a stand. He is not the sort of man you can push into a corner. There is ego and survivalism at stake. But he is not a lunatic like Kim Jong Il or sitting on mounds of corpses like the Burmese junta. The reality is he is in power and is showing no sign of going away. He says that he has a vision for a Fiji united under a common sense of citizenry. On the

surface, his plans for the economy appear sound; there are no radical plans for nationalisation for example. He is calling for time to put in place the reforms necessary to break what has dismissively become known as Fiji's 'coup culture'. Do we hold him to his word? There has been a litany of broken promises, which raise questions of motive and intent. But what is the alternative? The belligerent stances of Australia, New Zealand and Samoa have failed to bring about any positive change. At the other extreme, the relative silence of the MSG to date has puzzled many, especially as this sub-regional body, drawing on its history of political solidarity, perchance presents the best opportunity to broker a return to international engagement.

If the international response remains negative, it seems nothing, outside inciting rebellion there, is going to change Fiji's course for the next few years. The biggest danger is in fomenting any split in the Fiji military, which so far has closed ranks around their Commodore. If there is a military mutiny, it could end up creating a civil war with multi-ethnic groups on both sides. Continued economic meltdown and international isolation could lead to civil unrest and people pouring out onto the streets of Suva.

Perhaps it is time to acknowledge Bainimarama as being the imperfect vehicle for timely change in Fiji. Many in the international community want elections now. In the Pacific, things take time. In Fiji, challenges are best resolved through the process of *talanoa*, often digested over kava. The 'Pacific way' has helped keep the peace and mediate disputes for over 3,000 years. Drawing on this cultural asset will enrich Fiji's political process, shaping its relevance into the future. Elections alone do not make a true democracy. There are also concerns that engagement attests to legitimising a military government that came to power via the barrel of a gun. If Ban Ki Moon can meet with the Burmese generals, if Bush and Blair could work with Musharraf, if Obama can reach out to Iran, surely Forum leaders can seek to work with Bainimarama's interim government to find a way forward. Again, what is the alternative?

## National dialogue

There are many tough questions Commodore Bainimarama must face and he cannot escape his own people. He has to explain his actions a lot more. He cannot dismantle essential pillars of society without quickly replacing them with fair and effective new ones. If he intends to introduce Singaporean or Chinese-style media restrictions they will fail for the simple reason that Fiji is not East Asia and its people will not be corralled into one way of thinking. What is the point of 'real democracy' without free speech?

The 'Strategic Framework for Change' provides a starting point. But we await the detail, and in particular the speech fell short of confirming that this is about one-person one-vote, and that the military will relinquish power to an elected government by 2014. Most importantly, the process of preparing for that election and drafting a new constitution, is delayed for another three years, and then optimistically condensed into one year. By waiting until

## FIJI'S POLITICAL TIME LINE:

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- » **25 SEP 1987** 2nd Rabuka coup
- » **5 DEC 1987** Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau becomes president of the new Republic of Fiji and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara becomes interim prime minister
- » **25 JUL 1990** Constitution decreed into existence by President Ganilau
- » **MAY 1992** 6th general election won by Sitiveni Rabuka
- » **FEB 1994** 7th general election won by Sitiveni Rabuka
- » **25 JUL 1997** Constitution enacted
- » **15 MAY 1999** 8th general election won by Mahendra Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party
- » **19 MAY 2000** Speight storms the parliament and takes the prime minister and cabinet hostage for 56 days
- » **29 MAY 2000** Commodore Bainimarama takes power and abrogates the Constitution
- » **2 NOV 2000** mutiny at Queen Elizabeth Barracks
- » **1 MAR 2001** Constitution reinstated by Court of Appeal
- » **19 SEP 2001** 9th general election won by Laisenia Qarase's Soqosoqo ni Duavata Lewenivanua party
- » **13 MAY 2006** 10th general election won by Laisenia Qarase's Soqosoqo ni Duavata Lewenivanua party
- » **5 DEC 2006** Commodore Bainimarama led coup topples Qarase's government
- » **9 APR 2009** Court ruling that the 2006 coup was illegal
- » **10 APR 2009** President Ratu Josefa Iloilo abrogates the Constitution and appoints Commodore Bainimarama interim prime minister

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2012 to commence consultations will compromise its legitimacy. If there is to be another incarnation of the supreme law of the country, is it not in everyone's interests to get it right this time? There are also serious implications for a one-person one-vote system, including greater marginalisation of indigenous Fijians from the economy. Opening up the country further to Indian and Chinese businesses may well undermine indigenous interests and add further layers of corruption. Fiji should be mindful of a growing backlash in the region against Chinese-run businesses. The Solomon Islands, Tonga and recently PNG have all faced the fury of locals upset at Chinese domination of trade stores and in jobs. Moreover, if India and China plan to use Fiji to sell cheap produce or even to pursue naval base rights, the Commodore needs to explain how that is in Fiji's interests. Or the region. And, we are yet to hear whether the Commodore's plan for introducing equality extends to the inclusion of Indo-Fijians in the military. In fact, we need to hear what role the military is to assume in Fiji's 'new dawn'.

Tracing Fiji's troubled experiment with democracy reveals a lack of participatory national dialogue to address the pressing issues and sources of conflict: Race, land and the economy. The 1970 Constitution was mostly discussed and drafted in London. The 1990 version was prepared behind closed doors by the then interim (and unelected) administration. The 1997 consultations were much more widespread and returned a 'more inclusive, non-racial system of representation while protecting the legitimate interests and concerns of the different communities' (Lal 2006). A point exemplified through the subsequent election of the first Indo-Fijian led government in 1999 and multiparty, multi-race cabinet following the 2006 election.

Perhaps more important than a revised constitution document is a rigorous national dialogue. It will only be through open, two-way conversation that the deep-seated hostilities and mistrust can be mended. Fiji is not the only nation in the region that would benefit from a well thought through reconciliation process. Various attempts have been made in Australia (with the Rudd government's apology in January 2008 taking the discussion to a significant new level), in New Zealand (arguably the most proactive since the 1985 Labour government heard claims under the Treaty of Waitangi) and in the Solomon Islands (where recently hopes for a long lasting peace were boosted by Archbishop Desmond Tutu launching the Pacific's first Truth and Reconciliation Commission). What these and other examples (South Africa for instance) point to is the enormity of the task and the time required to enable lasting and fruitful dialogue.

## The way forward

Commencing a truly participatory national dialogue in Fiji would be a significant achievement in itself. The enormity of the task should not delay its commencement. The agenda of the national conversation is for the peoples of Fiji alone to determine and debate. Many have made a start - including Commodore Bainimarama, historian Brij Lal and lawyer Graham Leung. There are differences; that is the point of dialogue. The international community can and should support this process. The MSG countries in particular can assume a leading role to bring Fiji back into the community of nations.

So let us all lend Fiji a hand to move forward, with the best interests of the Fijian people at heart. That will not work with a heavy hand. Nor can it be received with a clenched fist.

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