Politics in Fiji: Just a Question of Race?
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26 May 1993

Parliamentary Research Service

Background Paper Number 11 1993
Politics in Fiji:
Just a Question of Race?

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Introduction

When the newly-elected Prime Minister of Fiji, Sitiveni Rabuka, was shown on Australian television in September 1992 agreeing to the suggestion that Fiji would be better off if all the Indians in the country went back to India, many Australians saw this as confirmation that politics in Fiji was basically a question of race. Yet just two months later Rabuka made a call for the formation of a government of national unity to include the parties which mainly represented the Indian community. To add to the seeming paradox, Rabuka was able to retain a majority in parliament only because of support from the largely Indian-backed Labour Party, the very party whose government he overthrew in a military coup in May 1987.

Mercurial though Rabuka may be, these developments should not simply be seen as the product of one man's personality. Events since 1987 have revealed Fiji to be a country with deep social cleavages, and Rabuka's apparent changeability can be seen as a product of his attempts to balance the support of a range of competing interests. The nature of these divisions in Fijian society and politics has frequently been analysed in racial terms. And indeed the politics of race or ethnicity are central to an understanding of Fiji. This paper, however, aims to show that developments in Fiji should not seen simply as a contest of interests between two ethnic groups. The history of Fiji has been marked by co-operation and competition across ethnic lines produced by regional, class and cultural divisions within the various communities. As their country has changed economically and socially, many people in Fiji have found that they sometimes have more in common with groups outside their own ethnic community than within. In particular, the coups of 1987, and subsequent events, had as much to do with divisions within the indigenous Fijian elite and society as they did with inter-racial tensions.

The coups of 1987, along with the Bougainville crisis in Papua New Guinea, have presented the two greatest threats to political stability in the south Pacific region. Australians had long been accustomed to seeing the Pacific as a tranquil and sleepy backwater far removed from the conflicts of the modern world. The military overthrow of an elected government showed that Fiji, like other Pacific island nations, has been experiencing the sort of strains which have accompanied economic development and social change in most parts of the developing world. This paper analyses the nature of those changes, as Fiji has developed from a colony to a modern state, and the challenges which events in Fiji have presented to Australian foreign policy-makers.
Ethnicity in Fiji’s economy and society

Fiji is a country of nearly 750,000 people, the second largest of the Pacific island countries after Papua New Guinea. The population is composed of over 360 000 indigenous Fijians, about 340,000 people of Indian descent (Indo-Fijians) and about 40 000 people of other races, including Europeans, part-Europeans and Chinese. The social divisions in modern Fiji have their origin both in the nature of pre-colonial Fijian society and in the economic development of the country under British colonialism.\(^1\) The colonial state provided a framework which enabled British and Australian interests to exploit Fiji’s resources, developing the sugar, timber and gold-mining industries. The British facilitated their rule through accommodating, and partly creating, a Fijian chiefly elite and by importing Indian labour for the sugar and timber industries.

The Fiji island group was originally settled by people of Melanesian descent, but in recent centuries the eastern part of the group (and the southeast of the largest western island, Viti Levu, where Suva is now located), came under the influence of Polynesian, especially Tongan, culture and politics. In the east, the Polynesian chiefly system came to predominate while the more egalitarian Melanesian traditions remained strong in the west.\(^2\) As will be discussed below, division between the eastern and western parts of the country have remained an important feature of Fijian society up to the present day.

Fiji had been divided by violent internal conflict for many years when European colonists began to arrive in the first half of the nineteenth century. Rival contenders for chiefly power sought to establish their dominance in the eastern islands and to extend a Polynesian-style hierarchical chiefly system westwards over the entire island group. Australians, British and Americans, first harvesting sandalwood and seaweeds for the Chinese market, and later establishing plantations of copra, cotton and sugar, sided with individual chiefs and provided them with guns and other support in return for the right to exploit local land and labour resources. By the 1870s, the war chief of Bau island, Cakobau, had established tenuous control over most of the islands. But with the increasing economic value of Fiji to the British Empire, and with the United States and other colonial powers increasing their influence in the Pacific, the British government decided to intervene directly. Cakobau and the other high chiefs were induced to seek the

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1 The first sections of this paper draw considerably from Bill Standish, "The End of "A New Era" in Fiji: Towards an Interpretation”, *Parliamentary Research Service Background Paper*, 1987.

protection of the British Crown. In 1874 they signed the Deed of Cession, giving sovereignty over Fiji to Britain, in return for guarantees that their position would not be undermined.

The legacy of this arrangement was to entrench the power of the eastern chiefs. The former Prime Minister and now President of Fiji, Ratu ('Paramount Chief') Sir Kamasese Mara, and the former Deputy Prime Minister, Governor-General and President of Fiji, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, are two of the prominent eastern chiefly politicians. The first British governor established a Great Council of Chiefs to facilitate the colonial government's control over Fijian society through co-option and strengthening of chiefly authority. Because chiefly power was weaker and based on smaller territories in the western part of the country, the Council was dominated by chiefs from the eastern region. The Great Council of Chiefs has had great informal power in Fijian politics and, under the 1990 constitution, has the power to appoint the President and twenty-four indigenous Fijian members to the Senate, the upper house of parliament.

The chiefs also have a strong influence through their control over issues which particularly affect the indigenous Fijian community (especially land), a control granted to them by the British and still in effect. Land rents for sugar farming and revenues from forestry are collected by largely chiefly bodies such as the Native Lands Trust Board and Fiji Forests Commission. After taking a commission, such bodies distribute the revenue to the landowning clans through their chief, who personally retains a large share. The chiefs are thus in a symbiotic relationship with the predominantly Indian commercial sugar and rice growers and the European and Indian-owned timber industry. This gives the chiefs a strong stake in blocking reforms to this system, such as changes to rent levels, security of tenure or alienation of land. The past century has shown continual effort by the Fijian chiefs to inhibit social change in Fijian society. The clans still own 80 per cent of the land (but not the best quality land), with the remainder alienated to freehold or owned by the government.

The economic segregation of the races in Fiji, which began with the arrival of European colonists, was greatly increased with the introduction of indentured labour from India. The British authorities decided to keep most of the indigenous population out of direct involvement in the modern economy and under the influence of the chiefs. The majority of Fijians were engaged in subsistence agriculture, combined with some production of food for urban and plantation

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4 Standish, op. cit.: 5.
consumption. Laws were passed to exclude ethnic Fijians from commerce and to restrict their entry into wage labour to a few industries. These regulations exacerbated a shortage of labour caused by the death of 40 000 Fijians in a measles epidemic in 1875.\(^5\) To meet the European settlers' growing demand for labour, between 1879 and 1916 thousands of workers were recruited from India to work for the colonial government and for the sugar industry, which was dominated by the Australian Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR). Most of the Indians stayed in the colony permanently. Many have become small sugar farmers leasing land from the Native Lands Trust Board. Just as Fijians were excluded from the sugar industry, so Indo-Fijians were prohibited from living in traditional villages and from certain areas in the eastern part of the colony. Education was segregated and as late as 1960 only 6 per cent of schools were officially described as mixed. The stereotyped association of Indians with business emerged when some former Indian labourers went into trades, rice growing and shopkeeping. Their numbers were later increased by migration of small business people, particularly from Gujarat in western India.

Although the majority of Fijians were restricted to agriculture, from the 1930s the goldmining and stevedoring industries became an important source of waged employment for ethnic Fijians. In recent decades, economic development has drawn Fijians into the towns in search of employment and has led to the growth of a large urban Fijian population.

**The politics of ethnic division**

As early as the 1880s the chiefs had expressed concern that indentured labourers should return home after the expiry of their contracts because of their 'thieving propensities' and 'distasteful' customs.\(^6\) Alarm also grew amongst the chiefs as the number of Indians increased and measles ravaged the indigenous community. By the 1950s the Indians were a slight majority of the population. In subsequent decades the proportion of ethnic Fijians increased and the departure of some Indians after the 1987 coups strengthened the Fijians' majority.

The political significance of the ethnic division was given clear expression from the 1930s when Indo-Fijian community leaders began to argue for a common electoral roll, with the goal of equal representation with the European community. The Great Council of

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5 Sutherland, *op. cit.*: 29.

Chiefs, however, saw the demand as a threat to its position: the Council nominated Fijian representatives to the colonial legislative council and was the apex of the separate colonial local government system for Fijians known as the Fijian Administration. The chiefs saw the common roll as an Indian attempt to dominate and raised the theme which has become a recurring feature of Fiji's politics - the protection of Fijian interests.\(^7\)

During the 1960s, as decolonisation and independence drew near, Fiji politics began to coalesce around ethnically-based political parties. Fijian ethnic leaders looked towards Malaysia, identified with the social position of the Malay bumiputras ('sons of the soil'), and took Malaysia as a political model. Following the Malaysian example, the Alliance Party was formed out of an arrangement between the Fijian Association (founded in the 1950s), the Indian Alliance, created by Indo-Fijian businessmen, and a General Electors' Party set up by European, Chinese and part-European businessmen. Established in 1966, the Alliance Party was led by Ratu Mara and dominated Fiji's politics from the time of independence in 1970. The Alliance Party's ethnic Fijian supporters have seen the party as the protector of their interests and as the natural party of government, but it has always needed to gain some support among other ethnic groups in order to stay in office. Sections of the Indo-Fijian community, though divided along economic and cultural lines, were galvanised during a dispute in the sugar industry in 1960 and came together to form the National Federation Party (NFP) in the 1963 election. The NFP was supported by Indo-Fijian farmers and workers, professionals and smaller businessmen, and gained some scattered support, mainly in the west, amongst ethnic Fijian farmers and workers.

Incidents of small-scale ethnic violence in the 1968 elections overshadowed negotiations for independence. These clashes helped convince leaders on both sides of the ethnic divide that political compromise would be necessary in the post-independence Fiji constitution, with the Indo-Fijians reconciling themselves to a communally-based electoral system with special representation for the indigenous Fijians. The 1970 constitution provided for twenty two seats each in the House of Representatives for the Fijian and Indian communities and eight for General Electors. Electors were given a vote in both Communal and National seats. The Senate comprised seven nominees of the Prime Minister, six nominees of the Leader of the Opposition, one nominee of the island of Rotuma and eight nominees of the Great Council of Chiefs. Constitutional changes required a two-thirds vote of both Houses. Fiji also inherited from the British a military force which was 98 per cent ethnic Fijian.

\(^7\) Standish, op. cit.: 7.
Apart from a few months in 1987, the Alliance Party held power from independence until last year's election through a delicate coalition of social forces. It melded the interests of the eastern chiefs with Indo-Fijian and European business groups and maintained a mass base in the majority of the indigenous Fijian community. Successive Alliance governments protected chiefly power and thereby ensured that the chiefs would use their influence to prevent the rise of ethnic Fijian extremism and communal violence (which threatened to break out during the 1968 election). This was necessary to guarantee the support of economically important Indian and European business interests and exclude the possibility that Indo-Fijian businessmen, farmers and workers might join forces along ethnic lines. At various times, however, the dominance of the Alliance has been challenged by opposition forces. These have arisen from regional and economic divisions within the indigenous Fijian population cutting across the allegiances of the bipolar racial divide and fostering unity with Indo-Fijians.

The 1977 elections and Fijian nationalism

During the April 1977 election the moderate policies of Ratu Mara's Alliance came under attack from Sakiasi Butadroka, a Fijian MP expelled from the Alliance because of his racially provocative statements, including a motion in the House of Representatives in 1975 that people of Indian origin should be repatriated to India at the expense of the British government.8 His new Fijian Nationalist Party (FNP) gained 24.4 per cent of the Fijian communal vote and cost the Alliance control of parliament. Fearing an extremist Fijian backlash, the leadership of the notoriously faction-ridden National Federation Party was internally divided over whether to use their two seat majority to form a government which would inevitably be branded Indian-dominated. This indecision allowed the Governor-General to recall Ratu Mara as Prime Minister. A second election was called in September 1977 after the NFP moved a vote of no-confidence in the government. The NFP, however, was unable to resolve its internal differences and the two factions in the party campaign almost as two separate parties. The Alliance mounted a vigorous campaign which regained most of those elements of its indigenous Fijian base which had been disaffected by what they saw as the party's lethargy and won it a clear mandate. Butadroka campaigned unsuccessfully from jail (having been convicted for sedition in spreading racial disharmony)

and the FNP's vote dropped to 17 per cent of the Fijian communal vote.9

The rise of Butadroka, a local politician from Rewa Province, was partly an expression of provincial Fijian rivalries, especially the traditional divisions between east and west. His party, however, broadened its support by attacking the Alliance for being in league with Indian business interests. In doing so the FNP was tapping into dissatisfaction amongst ethnic Fijians about the slow pace of regional economic development, while pandering to the Fijian tendency to blame the Indians for such problems.10 The two 1977 elections underscored the potential for militant Fijian nationalism and the reluctance on the part of Indo-Fijian community leaders to inflame these feelings.

The 1982 election: challenges to eastern dominance

The intense interest in the 1982 poll was shown by the high voter turnout - 85.6 per cent in a country where voting is voluntary. The election took place in an environment of accelerating social change and the rise of western resentment against the dominance of eastern chiefs. There has been a history of western-based challenges to colonial power and its eastern chiefly allies, but the localised nature of political leadership in the west has consistently weakened such challenges.11 In the 1982 elections, many of the socially diffuse elements of western sentiment came together in the Western United Front (WUF). The impetus came from Fijian landowners involved in pine plantations who became concerned that they were neither in control of the Fiji Pine Commission nor reaping due rewards for their contribution to this major new industry. The pine issue became a focus for the 'long-standing western Fijian resentment at their peripheral treatment'12 by the government. The west was the site for most of Fiji's gold mines and the increasingly important tourist industry and saw itself as making a greater contribution to the economy than the politically


12 Lal, Broken Waves: 246.
dominant east. Despite this, westerners were under-represented in the national and provincial administration and in statutory bodies. The WUF entered into a coalition with the National Federation Party and was able to win 7 per cent of Fijian Communal votes, thus helping to reduce the Alliance's seats by four: twenty eight to twenty four. The WUF was to be less important in the 1987 election, but showed again that significant economic and social divisions existed in the indigenous Fijian community. The fact that the Alliance Party could defeat a coalition unifying certain Indian and Fijian interests by a mere 2 000 votes, raised alarm amongst some members of the Fijian elite. The then President of the Great Council of Chiefs, Ratu Sir Penia Ganilau, expressed deep sorrow at the apparent loss of chiefly influence, attacked those 'commoners' who criticised their chiefs and exhorted Fijians to retain their unity under the guidance of the chiefs. Some Fijian landowners threatened their Indo-Fijian tenants with eviction and several Fijian Senators came close to echoing Butadroka, declaring that 'blood will flow' if Indians did not 'eling' to Fijians. They called for the deportation of Opposition leaders who had allegedly insulted chiefs. Such sentiments were not openly supported in the Fijian community as a whole, but a call by the Great Council of Chiefs for the reservation of two thirds of seats in the House of Representatives was supported by 64 per cent of literate urban Fijians in one opinion poll. The Council was generally a force for inter-ethnic moderation, but was not above making appeals to ethnic Fijian chauvanism when it saw its position being undermined.

Economic development and social change

The growth of east-west regionalism in the 1980s exemplified the already existing tensions in indigenous Fijian society which were being exacerbated by economic and social change. The 1970s had been a period of economic prosperity for Fiji, with good prices for the country's exports. World demand for sugar was high and Fiji had preferential access to the European Community sugar market through the Lome Convention. Healthy export earnings stimulated growth in other sectors such as manufacturing and services. Some of the legalised chiefly powers over villagers which restricted their movement were reduced and many young Fijians moved to urban areas in search of new opportunities. By the 1980s, however, world economic growth had slumped and export prices had plummeted, with less of Fiji's sugar


14 Norton, op. cit.: 122.
receiving preferential treatment in the EC.\textsuperscript{15} As the economy stagnated, job growth failed to keep pace with the rise in population, bringing increased unemployment and underemployment and rising urban poverty.\textsuperscript{16}

Economic and demographic changes soon had a social and political impact. As one political scientist observed:

The tension between rising expectations and rapidly falling opportunities contributed to an increase in crimes of theft and violence by young Fijians in the towns and dissaffection in the villages.\textsuperscript{17}

Young ethnic Fijians began to question chiefly authority and resent their privileges, perceiving that the chiefs were becoming wealthy through involvement in government and government-supported business, while neglecting traditional obligations to assist their own people. This resentment was also directed towards the Indian community which was seen to be more wealthy and educated. Newly urbanised ethnic Fijians came into direct competition with their Indo-Fijian counterparts for scarce jobs. On the other hand, many of those ethnic Fijians who were in employment became involved in the trade union movement where they often co-operated with Indo-Fijian fellow workers. Many Fijians in the west saw the possibility of making common cause with sections of the Indian community against eastern chiefly dominance. Therefore, paradoxically, these developments had the effect of increasing some Fijians' resentment against Indians while increasing other Fijians' links with them. Both challenged the position of the chiefs: the first threatened to undermine respect for the chiefly system and cause racial conflict and the second created the potential for an inter-ethnic political combine which could supplant the Alliance Party.\textsuperscript{18} In part, both of these fears came to reality for the chiefs with the growth of the militant nationalist Fijian Taukei movement and with the rise of the Labour Party.

\textsuperscript{15} See Bill Emmott, 'Fiji: Islands in the Wind', The Economist, 27 July 1985: 23-30, for a good and often quite prescient survey of economic and political conditions in Fiji in the early 1980s.

\textsuperscript{16} Norton, op.cit.: 122-125.

\textsuperscript{17} Norton, op. cit.: 125.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.: 131-32.
The Labour Party, the Taukei movement and the crisis of 1987

The formation of the Labour Party was the result of a confluence of factors. The first was the development of the trade union movement from the end of the 1970s. Fiji experienced a number of trade union struggles in various industries this century, some of which divided the work force on ethnic lines and some of which united it. Post-independence economic development enabled growth and consolidation within the trade union movement, and by the mid-1980s about half the waged labour force was unionised. In 1984 the government responded to Fiji's growing economic difficulties by unilaterally imposing a wage freeze, a move which led union leaders to seek the formation of a political party to represent workers' interests. The decision, in July 1985, to launch the Fiji Labour Party (FLP) was also spurred by factionalism in the National Federation Party which had undermined its claims to be a credible opposition to the Alliance. The leader of the Labour Party, Dr Timoci Bavadra, was both a chief of a clan from west Viti Levu island and head of the Public Servants' Association, a combination which symbolised the nature of the party's challenge to the eastern chiefly establishment. The Labour Party was a coalition of influential ethnic Fijians from the west, ethnic Fijians involved in the trade union movement and Indian members of trade unions and farmers' organisations. It was influenced by an emerging Fijian intelligentsia (mainly from the University of the South Pacific in Suva) which espoused a non-racial social-democratic philosophy.

In an atmosphere of public allegations of corruption and autocratic leadership against the Alliance Party government, including dissatisfaction with Mara's reversal of the previously anti-nuclear foreign policy, the FLP quickly emerged as an important opposition party. In 1986 the party won 39 per cent of the vote in the Suva City Council elections. Despite growing self-confidence, the FLP leadership realised it needed the support of the NFP in rural areas to win the forthcoming 1987 election. It therefore formed a Coalition


20 Norton, op. cit.: 123.


22 Lal, Broken Waves: 259.
with the NFP and came to an arrangement which ensured that only one of the two party's candidates would stand in each electorate.

Although subsequent events might suggest otherwise, the election campaign of April 1987 was not dominated by the traditional issues of race and community, but saw a more open discussion about the economic future of the country. The result was a narrow victory to the Labour-NFP Coalition, which won twenty eight seats to the Alliance's twenty four. Voting generally followed the usual ethnic pattern, but there was a modest flow of ethnic Fijian support away from the Alliance to the Coalition, which received 8.5 per cent of Fijian communal votes. The Alliance also suffered from a low turnout of ethnic Fijians and an increase in support for other Fijian parties and independents. Nevertheless, as provided for under the 1970 constitution, the parliament was still composed of twenty two indigenous Fijians, twenty two Indo-Fijians and eight General Electors members, and the chiefs retained their constitutionally-guaranteed dominance in the Senate. The Coalition Ministry was made up of six Fijians and one part-Fijian and seven Indo-Fijians, a balance of participation be the two main races never before achieved by a government in Fiji. The government was headed by an indigenous Fijian, and the ministries considered to be essential to Fijian interests, such as Home Affairs, Fijian Affairs, Labour, Land, Forests and Agriculture, were held by indigenous Fijians.\textsuperscript{23}

Despite the ethnic balance of the Coalition government, the fact that it had mainly been elected on Indo-Fijian votes led to a backlash amongst radical nationalist Fijians. Within days of the election several Alliance members of the new parliament organised mass protests. An organised movement of opposition to the Coalition government, which named itself the Taukei ('Owners of the Land') Movement, soon developed. There was a wave of rallies and marches in Suva and across Viti Levu by Fijians declaring that they had lost control of their own country. Their numbers were swelled by easterners, including Lauans from Ratu Mara's home province, angry at the toppling of their paramount chief by a minor chief from the west. Many chiefs called on ethnic Fijians to respect the authority of the new government, but on the first day of parliament, only five Alliance MPs defied the crowds outside the parliament building and joined the swearing-in ceremony. Ratu Mara remained silent in the face of the Taukei agitation, a gesture which, in Fijian culture, can be taken to mean implicit consent.\textsuperscript{24} One week later, on 14 May 1987, twelve masked men, led

\textsuperscript{23} Lal, Broken Waves: 269-70.

by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, entered parliament and abducted the Coalition members at gunpoint.

Rabuka's stated motivations in the coup of 14 May was to protect traditional chiefly-based society from the vulagi (foreigners). He was, however, also attempting to balance the radicalism of the Taukei Movement with the traditional authority of the chiefs who supported the coup but who were concerned that the Taukei Movement could get out of control and lead the country into social and economic chaos. The Taukei Movement acted in the name of defence of the chiefly system and the traditional 'paramounty of Fijian interests', but the Movement was a new form of politics for Fiji, 'commoners on the fringes of the Fijian establishment' and drawing its strength from an ability to mobilise dissatisfied Fijian youth. Although tacitly supporting the Taukei Movement, many Alliance leaders feared that its militant racism could upset the balance between the Fijian chiefs and Indian and European business interests which had dominated post-independence Fiji. The previous Prime Minister, Ratu Mara, joined Rabuka's government and a meeting of the Great Council of Chiefs endorsed the coup. But when Ratu Mara, Ratu Ganilau and Dr Bavadra drew up the Deuba Accord, under which a caretaker government drawn from both the Alliance and the Coalition would be formed, an outraged reaction from the Taukei Movement induced Rabuka to stage a second coup on 25 September 1987. When Ratu Ganilau refused to step down as Governor-General, Rabuka dismissed him, revoked the 1970 constitution and declared Fiji a republic.

In June 1990 the Great Council of Chiefs agreed to a constitution which provided for a House of Representatives with seventy seats, thirty seven held by indigenous Fijians, twenty seven by Indo-Fijians, five by other races of General Electors and one by a representative of the remote island of Rotuma. The obvious racial bias of the constitution, however, should not be allowed to obscure some equally important objectives implicit in the regional distribution of seats. While Indian seats had an average of 5 500 voters against 4 159 for Fijian seats, there was an even greater weighting given to provincial versus urban Fijian seats - 3 457 to 8 655 respectively. Urban Fijian voters totalled 13.7 per cent of the voting population but received only 7.1 per cent of seats. In addition, provincial areas which were traditionally most supportive of chiefly candidates received greater

representation. Voters per seat in the various provinces ranged from 950 to 5,700. The position of the Great Council of Chiefs was further reinforced through its nomination of twenty-four of the thirty-four Senate members. The Rabuka regime achieved its main aim of rewriting the Fiji constitution to entrench the power of the eastern chiefly elite and to reduce the influence of Indo-Fijian workers and farmers and any indigenous Fijians who might make common cause with them.

Despite Rabuka's ability to enforce his rule through the military, his government came under heavy internal and international pressure. The coups were very economically damaging to Fiji. The mostly Indian sugar farmers refused to harvest, the tourism industry virtually collapsed, there was a flight of educated Indian labour and investment, foreign investment fell, and economic and other aid from Western countries was suspended. Apart from support from some other Melanesian countries such as Papua New Guinea, the government was diplomatically isolated. Rabuka and four other members of the military maintained a presence in the interim government established in December 1987 with Ratu Mara as Prime Minister, but in 1989 they returned to the barracks. Ratu Mara remained as Prime Minister until the holding of elections. Elections were promised and postponed several times, but after four and a half years of the interim government, elections were held in May 1992.

The 1992 elections and the re-emergence of Rabuka

The 1992 election campaign was conducted in an atmosphere of uncertainty and the final result came as a surprise to most commentators. Rabuka made contradictory statements on whether he would stand for the Prime Ministership in the event of an election victory by the new chiefly-based party, the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) (which roughly translates to Fijian Political Party), and the Labour Party was divided over whether to boycott the election. As predicted, the SVT emerged as the largest party in parliament, but with thirty seats in the seventy-seat parliament, was unable to form a government. The other seven Fijian seats were shared between Independents and two Fijian-nationalist splinter parties. A month before the poll the Labour Party decided to contest the election. The party had limited financial resources and little time in which to

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28 Sutherland, op. cit.: 201-202.

29 Howard, op. cit.: 279-86.
endorse candidates and organise a campaign, but to many people's surprise it won thirteen seats.\textsuperscript{30}

The SVT's inconclusive victory set off a struggle for the Prime Ministership between Rabuka and the former Deputy Prime Minister, Josevata Kamikamica, who was supported by Ratu Mara. Kamikamica was expected to put together a majority with the General Voters' Party (composed of European, Chinese and mixed race people) and the Independents. Rabuka, however, outmanoeuvred his rival and gained the agreement of the Labour Party to support his Prime Ministership. Rabuka was able to secure the support of the Labour Party by agreeing to a number of its demands: abandon plans for a 10 per cent VAT, repeal anti-union laws, review the 1990 constitution and improve security of tenure for sugar farmers. The Labour Party refused to enter a formal coalition with the SVT, but with Rabuka able to command the support of at least forty three members on the floor of the House, the President agreed to appoint him as Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{31}

Conclusion: a new multiracial politics?

The events of 1987 were a watershed in Fijian history. The ethnic divide in Fiji meant that the ostensible target of the coups was the Indo-Fijian community, but the causes of the crisis were more complex than just racial tension. The political order under successive Alliance governments was based on a version of multiracialism at an elite level: an arrangement between the chiefs and Indian and European business interests. This order was driven by the politics of patronage and the ability of the chiefs to secure the votes of the mass of ethnic Fijians in the villages. Bavadra's Coalition government was a challenge to the old order because it threatened to replace the old politics with a new form of mass-based multiracialism. The Coalition, especially the Labour Party, was attempting to build an alliance between Indo-Fijian workers and farmers and the increasing numbers of ethnic Fijians entering, or seeking to enter, employment in the non-agricultural sector and living in urban areas. While the Alliance spoke in the language of community and tradition, the Coalition appealed to Fijians of all races to identify with those in the same economic condition: the politics of race versus the politics of class or interest group.

The coups were, in part, an attempt to restore the power and authority of the old chiefly-dominated Fijian order, under threat from social and political change brought on by economic development. But the trigger

\textsuperscript{30} Pacific Islands Monthly, June 1992: 8.

\textsuperscript{31} Pacific Islands Monthly, June 1992: 7-10.
of the coups, the Taukei Movement, represented a new kind of urban mass-based politics of non-chiefly Fijians which also represented a challenge to the primacy of the chiefs, even though its self-declared aims were to defend traditional structures. Similarly, the coups were led not by a chief, but by a commoner who has had an uneasy relationship with the traditional power-brokers of Fijian politics. The second coup of 1987 was, after all, a strike against a compromise formulated by the traditional Fijian leadership. Although Rabuka soon relinquished leadership of the post-coup regime, and withdrew completely from the interim government in 1989, his independent political ambitions resurfaced with his candidacy for a seat under the SVT banner.

Echoes of the tensions within the pro-coup forces could be seen in the contest for leadership of the SVT. Kamikamica, supported by Mara, represented a current of thinking within the SVT which wanted to preserve as much as possible of traditional Fijian political ways. Rabuka's candidacy, on the other hand, depended for its success on seeking support outside established circles of power. Ratu Mara has made no secret of his misgivings about Rabuka, calling him an "angry young man".32 For his part, Rabuka's replies to Mara's criticisms included the very revealing accusation that Mara was a ruthless politician who has been allowed to get away with a lot. Maybe it's part of the Fijian culture that he is a big chief and because he was groomed well by the colonial government.33

As one observer has noted:

The removal of the perceived threat of Indian dominance [by the coups] ... allowed more discussion of internal Fijian issues which had long remained hidden from the non-Fijian public.34

Rabuka's government since the 1992 election could be interpreted as an attempt the to establish a new multiracial arrangement for Fiji politics. The combination of parties supporting Rabuka's government suggests a realisation that the country can prosper only if the interests of the Indo-Fijian community are at least partially cared for. Rabuka has recognised the need to build support not only amongst ethnic


34 Ibid.: 9.
Fijian commoners but amongst the Indo-Fijian community as well. From the time of his withdrawal from the interim government, Rabuka made statements in support of striking nurses, Fijian gold miners and Indo-Fijian sugar farmers, and presented himself as a champion of Fijian commoners and ordinary people in general. Rabuka's alliance with the Labour Party is an indication of the increasing importance of multiracial politics organised around economic issues.

The principal problem facing Rabuka's apparent attempt to forge a new multiracial politics is the deep, and at times stridently expressed, divisions in Fiji politics. Rabuka's sometimes seemingly unsophisticated attempts to appeal to various groups have won him a well-earned mercurial image, but his self-contradictory stance underscores the profound differences amongst the constituencies he is attempting to reconcile. As part of his agreement with the Labour Party, Rabuka said he would not to introduce a VAT, but under pressure from the business community and faced with a large fiscal deficit, Rabuka introduced the tax soon after his election. The proposal to repeal anti-union legislation was also opposed by employers, and Rabuka's promise to do so has remained unfulfilled, although the laws have not been used. Rabuka has also prevaricated on the constitutional review issue and instead, in December 1992, proposed that some representatives of the National Federation Party and the Labour Party join the SVT in a government of national unity. This idea, and the generally conciliatory tenor of Rabuka's prime ministership, was vociferously attacked by the Taukei Movement which branded Rabuka as a traitor who had 'sold Fijian interests and aspirations to the Indian leaders for his own political security.'

Rabuka's proposal for a government of national unity was an attempt to strengthen and broaden the rather shaky foundation of his government by drawing the two main opposition parties into closer support of his administration. The suggestion was initially made in the sudden, 'off-the-cuff' Rabuka style, but he has persisted with the idea, making a presentation on the issue to a meeting of business leaders in April. The response of the National Federation Party and the Labour Party has, however, been cool. They see the proposal as an attempt to neutralise the opposition, allowing Rabuka to present


36 Lal, 'Elections and Politics in Contemporary Fiji': 19.

37 Sydney Morning Herald, 8 April 1993: 11.

38 Fiji Times, 26 April 1993: 10-11.
his government to the world as a multiracial administration, while actually making only token concessions to the opposition parties' demands.\(^{39}\) Unless a government of national unity contained significant numbers of Indo-Fijians and was the precursor to a constitutional review, it would be unlikely to find support with the Labour Party or the NFP, as both parties would fear alienating their own constituencies.

Although the opposition parties will not support unity proposals which do not involve significant concessions, the Rabuka government is likely to continue in power with Labour Party support. The Labour Party has gained little from its arrangement with Rabuka, but has little option but to back his government as preferable to a more chiefly-dominated or Fiji-nationalist alternative. For his part, Rabuka has to avoid the problems which confronted the interim government, an unelected and openly ethnic Fijian-dominated administration, which could not completely overcome its international isolation nor counter the economic damage caused by the outflow of Indo-Fijian skills and capital.

The crisis of 1987 was the product of a society suffering the strains of transition from an underdeveloped colonial possession to an industrialising state in a competitive world economy. The first tentative steps towards a new multiracial accommodation in Fiji which can be seen in the outcome of the 1992 elections will grow into a sustained movement only if the Fijian economy can develop to the extent necessary to fulfill the rising expectations of all communities. But equally, economic activity depends on the social stability which will be fostered if Indo-Fijian as well as the indigenous Fijian population feels secure in its place in Fijian society. Achieving such stability is the principal challenge which will test the quality of the leaders of all communities in Fiji today.

**Australia and Fiji**

Australia, as one of the two 'great powers' in the south Pacific (with New Zealand), has long had an important role in developments in Fiji. Australians were amongst the first European settlers in the country and the Australian Colonial Sugar Refinery Company dominated the economy of Fiji through control of the sugar industry until selling out to the newly independent government of Fiji in 1973. Fiji was represented at the early meetings of the Convention and Federal Council which held discussions on federation for the Australasian

colonies in the mid-1880s. Today, Australia is one of Fiji’s major trading partners and source of tourists, and its principle source of imports. The continuing close economic relationship is reflected in Australian investment in Fijian tourist developments and the growing garment manufacturing industry. The disparity in size between Fiji and Australia, however, limits most Australians’ knowledge of the links between the two countries, with popular awareness in Australia shaped by images of Fiji as a holiday destination.

Economic and historical connections, however, do not necessarily translate into diplomatic leverage, as the Australian government found when it attempted to influence events in Fiji the aftermath of the 1987 coups. The Fiji coups upset long-held Australian assumptions that any threat to stability in the Pacific would come from outside the region. Australian policy was oriented towards perceived threats from increased Soviet influence in the region and towards issues such as French nuclear testing and decolonisation, and was caught unawares by such internal political upheaval interest. The Australian government condemned the May coup, suspended the provision of new aid to Fiji, suspended the defence co-operation program and cancelled a round of bilateral economic talks. The imposition of economic sanctions was discussed in Cabinet but publicly ruled out by the government.

Although Australia’s stand against the new regime was joined by New Zealand, Australia found that its position attracted little support amongst other south Pacific countries. At a South Pacific Forum meeting just two weeks after the first coup, representatives from the deposed Bavadra government were not allowed to speak and the meeting adopted a resolution which merely expressed ‘concern’ at events in Fiji. That most Pacific leaders identified with the aims of the coup leaders was made clear from an earlier strongly-worded statement against foreign interference in Fijian affairs by the Melanesian Spearhead Group (Papua New Guinea, Solomons and Vanuatu). The reported statement by the premier of the Cook Islands and spokesperson for the Forum that ‘no real blooded ethnic Fijian


42 Howard, *op. cit.*: 280.

43 Ibid.: 281.
could let a bunch of Indians run the country expressed the widely-held idea that the coups had defended the rights of indigenous Pacific islanders.

As the Rabuka government consolidated its external and internal support, the Australian and New Zealand governments softened their stance. Australia's reaction to the second coup was muted and by 1988 a number of new aid projects had been resumed. This reflected the Australian government's desire to maintain support for the return of elective government while not jeopardising its influence in Fiji and the region. Momentum towards rapprochement with the Fijian government was strengthened by Fiji's evident ability to widen its economic and diplomatic links outside the Pacific to lessen its dependence on Australia and New Zealand. Such intentions were made very clear by the interim government's arrangement with a Malaysian oil company to provide all of Fiji's oil supplies, despite the fact that supplies could continue to be obtained more cheaply from Australia. The Fiji government's efforts to attract investment from the Asian region succeeded in drawing new venture capital from Malaysia, Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea.

Normalisation in relations moved a step closer when the Australian government welcomed the 1990 constitution as 'restor[ing] a degree of representative government to Fiji by providing for an early return to elected government'. A series of official and ministerial level bilateral discussions during 1991 led the Australian government to observe that Australia-Fiji relations were 'clearly improving'. Following the 1992 elections complete normalisation of the Australia-Fiji relationship was signalled by restoration of Australia's Defence Cooperation Program with Fiji to co-incide with the visit of the newly-elected Prime Minister Rabuka to Australia in September 1992. Shortly before the visit Rabuka also made gestures of conciliation by announcing that his government would commence a process of review of the 1990 constitution and by cancelling plans to obtain oil supplies through Malaysia.

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44 Lal, Broken Waves: 283.


47 Ibid.

Apart from the period in 1987 when bans by Australian and New Zealand trade unions brought the Fijian tourist industry to a standstill and reduced other trade, economic links between Australia and Fiji remained relatively strong during the period of diplomatic coolness. Duty-free access to the Australian market provided for goods from Pacific countries under the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA) continued to include Fiji. This was reflected in the 'business as usual' nature of discussion on trade and investment issues during Rabuka's visit. Rabuka emphasised that his government would continue the foreign investor-friendly economic policies of the interim government which had attracted Australian as well as other overseas capital. Fiji's main concern was that as Australia lowered its general level of tariff protection Fiji's relative advantage from duty-free access would diminish. The Australian government was of the view that the liberalisation occurring in both economies would boost economic opportunities for both countries.