

Debating Fiji's Democratic Future*

Brij V. Lal

The Qarase government won power in the 2001 Fiji general elections by skilful and unabashed harnessing of inflamed Fijian nationalist opinion following the civilian coup of a year earlier. The public purse was plundered to purchase votes in marginal Fijian constituencies, and promises were made to implement affirmative action programs exclusively for the indigenous community. 'Race' was back in business, as was overt racial discrimination. Among the promises Qarase's party, the *Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua*, made was to repeal the 1997 constitution to, in effect, realise the goals of the coup which dislodged Mahendra Chaudhry's Peoples Coalition government. Since then, the government and its nationalist allies on the fringes have advanced a number of arguments to reject democracy for the troubled island state. Their argument needs a critical response.

There are those who argue that democracy is a foreign flower unsuited to the Fijian soil which fetters indigenous aspirations and foists upon them a system they don't understand and intensely dislike. It is true, of course, that democracy is a foreign flower in Fiji and, for that matter, in most parts of the Third World once colonised by the West. But so, too, are most other things: rugby, writing, Christianity and, indeed, the modern state itself. There was no 'Fiji' before colonial contact, but a collection of warring matanitu seeking supremacy in the archipelago. No Fijian leader rejects the legitimacy of the nation state however much they might want it re-configured to express Fiji's complex history and contemporary reality. No one now argues that the Fijian people should reject Christianity because it came from outside. The Fijian attachment to the new lotu is deep and real. It forms the core of Fijian cultural identity. So rejecting one foreign flower while keeping others lacks sense. No one questioned the value of democracy when the Alliance party was in power. Is an argument being made that

* This brief piece contains ideas and arguments I presented in two newspaper pieces in September 2002 in response to an orchestrated move by some in government to drum up support for the rejection of the 1997 constitution.

democracy is acceptable only as long as it places one ethnic group in power? And if not democracy, what else: theocracy, monarchy?

If pressed, many in government, and in the Fijian community at large, will probably say that a Fijian should be head of government. It is a symbolic recognition and acceptance of Fijian indigeneity, and it is not too much to ask for.

On the face of it, that proposition is emotionally appealing, but only on the face. All Fijians are not peas in the same pod. They are as divided by class, status, regional and sub-cultural differences as the other communities. The point is too obvious to belabour: the existence of so many Fijian parties with divergent agendas and different political platforms puts paid to the contention of unity. And the differences will magnify with time as provincialism and regional rivalries rear their head in Fijian politics, and as chiefs and leaders with overarching mana depart the scene or wither on the vine of nationalist rhetoric.

The question today is really not whether Fiji should have a Fijian head of government. The real question is which Fijian will be acceptable to a particular (militant) section of the Fijian community at a given point in time. Major General Sitiveni Rabuka is as Fijian as they come, and he was defeated in 1994 and again in 1999 by Fijian votes. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara is a Fijian of the highest traditional rank, and he was turfed out of office by Fijian leaders of the military and the police. Commodore Frank Bainimarama is a Fijian, and some Fijian soldiers tried to kill him. George Speight sought to portray himself as a champion of indigenous rights by changing his name to Ilikini Naitini, and he is languishing in prison for treason (as he should). Some Fijians were even charged for plotting to kidnap Prime Minister Qarase. The question, then, is not really that simple. Merely having a Fijian as head of government is no panacea and no guarantee of political stability. That is the most obvious experience of our recent troubled history.

I wonder, too, if those who espouse this line of thought take it to its logical conclusion. If Fijian people can trust only an indigenous Fijian as their political leader, I wonder if they will demand to see only a Fijian doctor or nurse, however junior or inexperienced they might be, when they visit a hospital? How many will demand to travel in a bus or a taxi driven only by an indigenous Fijian, or take a plane journey piloted by an indigenous Fijian? Or have their children taught only by Fijian teachers? Or give up roti and curry on account these are not Fijian food? I am not being facetious; there is a larger point here about consistency. You cannot have it both ways.

The Prime Minister on occasion has sought to support the nationalist cause by invoking a novel argument: Fijians now own some 90 per cent of the land in Fiji and that crucial fact, he as-

serts, should somehow be reflected in the distribution of seats in parliament. Again, on the face of it, this assertion is emotionally appealing, but on reflection patently absurd. To talk about property being the basis of franchise or executive power in this day and age is anachronistic, to put it no higher – or lower – than that. Why property alone? Why not gender, or age, or religion, or the tax people pay?

There is something else to consider. Once you accept the land ownership argument, the next step will be a demand for greater representation by those provinces, such as Ba, which have more land than, say, Lau or Lomaiviti. How will their demand be accommodated in a system founded on the logic of property-based franchise? I am leaving aside, for the moment, the derision these ideas will cause in the international community and the certain rejection they will face. The truth is that in the 21st century, constitution making is a comparative exercise, and international opinion cannot be discountenanced.

The Prime Minister argues in favour of a racial system of voting because, he says, Fijians and Indo-Fijians overwhelmingly vote for their respective ethnic communities. That is, indeed, true, but why has this been so? There are other multi-ethnic states in developed as well as developing world where people are able to vote easily across ethnic and other boundaries. In Australia, one of the most multi-ethnic societies in the world, no one, including nationalist Fijians who choose to live there, asks for separate racial representation. Why is it that in Fiji, Fijians and Indo-Fijians are apparently so deeply attached to their primordial roots? The answer is simple: We have – always have had – a racially-based electoral system which forces people to vote along racial lines. This reinforces and rewards ethnic attachment. We erect a racial electoral system and then blame people for voting along racial lines. At each step of the way, public memory in Fiji is racially archived. One is asked to state ones 'race' on the immigration card upon entering the country. One is required to declare ones racial identity when s/he takes out a driver's license or opens a bank account. And then we blame people for thinking racially!

There are some who invoke various international conventions on tribal and indigenous rights to support the claim of Fijian paramountcy. But these conventions apply, or are intended to apply, to indigenous and tribal communities whose lands, culture, and separate identity are at the risk of marginalisation, such as the Hawaiians, the Maori and the Aborigines. To put the Fijian people in the same category as these tragically dispossessed people is to commit an act of grievous insult to them. Fijians have enjoyed autonomy in the management of their affairs ever since the advent of colonial rule in the late 19th century. Their separate cultural identity

has never been threatened. The truth is that at the heart of the these conventions lie two ideas: that the indigenous peoples will remain a distinct community and not forced to assimilate into a broader national community, and that they will enjoy equal, not superior, rights with other members of society. They provide for parity, not paramountcy.

There are those who argue for race-based affirmative action. I have no problem with the philosophy of affirmative action. An individual or a group demonstratively disadvantaged in some field of endeavour through no fault of his or its own deserves help from the state (though I do have a problem being sympathetic to a child who murders his parents and then pleads for clemency on the grounds that he is an orphan). To gain national support, affirmative action programs ought to be transparent, accountable and fair, and not based on politically motivated assumptions patently unsupported by empirical evidence – about, for example, one ethnic group being poor and in need of help and another being wealthy and therefore capable of looking after itself. Need, rather than ethnicity, I believe, should underpin affirmative action programs, and they should take due account of gender as well. Very often, in ethnically camouflaged projects, women get the short shrift.

Beyond a certain (and reasonable) point though, a dependent, handout mentality should, I imagine, become corrosive to quest for excellence. Why should anyone burn the midnight lamp if they can get by (and be rewarded for) a mere pass? When I think of the gallery of distinguished Fijian graduates – people who will be an ornament to any society, anywhere, anytime – I become more wary of the way we are doing things now. Think of Rusiate Nayacakalou, Isireli Lasaqa, Semesa Sikivou, Berenado Vunibobo, Filipe Bole, Josefata and Esiteri Kamikamica, Sulian and Savenaca Siwatibau, Taufu Vakatale, Mosese Qionabaravi, Laisenia Qarase, Kaliopate Tavola, Jioji Kotabalavu, Timoci Tuivaga, Timoci Bavadra – this list is by no means complete – and you realise that these distinguished individuals rose to the top of their professions through sheer merit and hard work and intense, unrelenting, open competition. They can hold their heads high in any company, as can such distinguished public figures as Tomasi Vakatora who did not have the benefit of university education. God knows we need more of them now, our best and brightest, in this age of globalization to represent our interests in the international community.

There are those who argue for a greater national role for the Great Council of Chiefs. As a matter of convention and courtesy, perhaps, but as a matter of constitutional right, no. In any event, for the chiefs to be accorded a national role, they have to accept a wider national responsibility to look after the welfare of all the citi-

zens of Fiji and not just a section of the community. They would have to become the custodians of national, as opposed to sectional, interests, above the ordinary play of electoral politics. The GCC was disappointing in the way it conducted its deliberations after the Speight coup. At the instigation of his forces, the chiefs voted to amend the constitution they themselves had blessed just a couple of years back. And there was no place at their table for the voice of those who were so cruelly cheated of their democratic rights. How do you explain this sudden volte-face? How can anyone seriously expect the aggrieved party to pay heed to a body which so brazenly disregarded their legitimate concerns in their moment of dire need and desperation? The trust between the chiefs and the people, so brutally sundered, will have to be repaired over time.

Critics of the 1997 constitution claim that the document is illegitimate because eight of the fourteen provinces rejected the report upon which it is based. Several things. What does it say about the six provinces which voted for the constitution: were they any less committed to the preservation and promotion of the Fijian cause than those who rejected it? Second, the provinces had their elected representatives in Parliament, chosen by themselves on separate racial rolls, all of who voted unanimously for the adoption of the constitution: what does all this say about the integrity and commitment of these individuals, among whom were a number of hard-line nationalists? And third, what does all this say about the authority, the mana, of the Great Council of Chiefs, where all the provinces are equitably represented: can the GCC be attacked as being insufficiently protective of Fijian interests? In fact, the provincial argument is spurious, invoked by those who had hoped to kill the Constitution by embroiling it in the endless machinations of provincial politics. Even if eleven of the fourteen provinces had voted in favour of the constitution, the critics would still argue for its rejection because three provinces had rejected it!

Some Fijian nationalists and their supporters in other communities argue for separate representation of minority groups in the hope that they, the minority groups, would side with the Fijian majority in return for privileged treatment in some sphere or the other. Divide and rule. Do we need further political fragmentation in an already ethnically divided society? How do you define a minority group: along ethnic, religious, linguistic, or cultural lines? Once you accord separate political representation to one group, don't you open the floodgates to others to make similar claims? Just because they have not asked for separate seats thus far does not mean that one can ignore their plea in the future. Principle is principle. Where does one stop? Come to think of it, the smaller the group, the greater, and more legitimate, its claim to

separate representation would be. Among them, in Fiji, would be the Rabi Islanders, the Solomon Island community, the Chinese, and so on. There is much truth in the claim that the ultimate minority is the individual, and if you protect the right of the individual, you in fact protect the right of all minority groups in equal measure.

And so it goes. I am, when I think about it, a hopeless, bleeding heart liberal. I recognise the essential emptiness of essentialist ethnic or racial constructions that compartmentalise people in ghettos. I revel in the interconnectedness of things, in the common humanity that unites us all. There is no alternative to multiracial co-existence. We are an island, but an island in the physical sense alone. That is the inescapable truth of our geography and history.

Brij Lal is Professor of Pacific History at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia. He was one of the three members of the Constitutional Review Commission in Fiji during 1995-7.