

## Book Reviews

**Winston Halapua. (2003). *Tradition, Lotu and Militarism in Fiji, Lautoka: Fiji Institute of Applied Studies; 227 pp.***

**Sandra Tarte**

As the author informs us in the Preface, this book was ‘born out of the 1987 crisis in Fiji’ and a concern that Fiji and the region were witnessing a trend towards militarism. Winston Halapua, an ordained Anglican minister and now an academic in Auckland, explains how, as a church leader in Fiji in 1987, he had ‘struggled to find ways and means of leading the Church’ during the 1987 coups and their aftermath. One outcome of this ‘struggle’ was a PhD thesis, written at the University of the South Pacific and recently published by the Lautoka-based Fiji Institute of Applied Studies.

Militarism is a many faceted process. As defined in this study, militarism is more than the overthrow of elected government by the military forces (as occurred in 1987 in Fiji). It is also the exercise of influence by the military forces, directly and indirectly, in the decision-making and governing of the nation. Why this is a concern or a problem for Fiji, according to Halapua, is because this influence has been used to protect and promote the interests of a select few: what he refers to as the ruling class or *turaga* class. Militarism, he argues, ‘refers to a situation created by the military in association with other middle class Fijians and the chiefly aristocracy to exploit the majority of Fijians to serve their own interests’ (p.67). The long-term result is a society that has grown increasingly violent, unstable and divided.

The title of the book, *Tradition, Lotu and Militarism*, encapsulates the essence of Halapua’s main argument; that is, the existence of close collusion between the traditional chiefs in Fiji, the Methodist Church (*Lotu*) and the military. This collusion dates back to colonial times when the colonial administration created a Council of Chiefs, which the Methodist Church ‘helped to entrench and legitimize’, and the Fiji Military Forces defended. But Halapua also finds pre-colonial antecedents to this alliance, reflected in the traditional roles of the *turaga*, *bete* and *bati*. What changed during the colonial period was the

introduction of a capitalist economy, dependent on a global economy, that re-shaped existing social relations and created new class dynamics.

Due to their privileged role within the traditional structure, chiefs in Fiji benefited disproportionately from the new capitalist economy. This situation continued in the post-colonial era, for example, in the distribution of the revenue from land rentals, managed by the Native Land Trust Board. But rather than encouraging a sharing or redistribution of this wealth, Halapua argues that chiefs instead exploited traditional (*vanua*) allegiances and ethnic fears to entrench their power and privilege. In this process, the military 'stood behind ... as guardians of the capitalist economy and the interests of the chiefs within this economy' (p.29).

Although this book is not specifically about the 1987 military coups in Fiji, it does seek to interpret these events through the framework of 'tradition, *lotu* and militarism'. According to Halapua, the military used the ideology of *noqu kalou noqu vanua noqu matanitu* (my God, my land, my government) to legitimize the coup of May 1987. By restoring to power the Alliance Party leadership, Halapua argues that the military was defending chiefly political rule. Popular indigenous support for the coup was in turn mobilized by the Church, namely the Methodist Church to which the majority of indigenous Fijians belonged. Halapua in fact suggests that the military was prepared for this role of 'armed force of the chiefly oligarchy' by its involvement in peace-keeping operations, that began in 1978. '(Ratu) Mara was expanding the size of military and using it to gain experience in places which were torn by internal strife' (p.51). For Halapua, it was no coincidence that this 'expansion' began one year after the Alliance Party almost lost power to the National Federation Party in the first election of 1977.

While the argument that the military exists to 'defend the ruling class and its system of production' (p.61) may have some validity in explaining the events of 1987, it is perhaps less relevant in the context of the May 2000 political crisis. Halapua makes little attempt to analyze these more recent events, other than to view them as consistent with, and an inevitable consequence of, the earlier interventions. What he is concerned with are the broader, long-term effects of militarism on the nation and specifically on indigenous Fijians.

For the indigenous Fijians, one principal effect of militarism has

been the corruption and inversion of traditional Fijian value systems manifested in the notions of *vanua*, *turaga* and *vasu*. While these are founded on reciprocity, militarism is based on the reverse (exploitation) and has contributed to the malaise, if not crisis, in Fijian culture. This crisis, in turn, is manifested in the increase of poverty, crime and other social ills such as domestic violence and suicide. Halapua maps the escalation of these problems in Fiji since 1987 in order to demonstrate that their root cause lies in militarism and the exploitative class structure it supports. Among other things, he argues that militarism 'weakens the economic strength of the nation, thereby creating stress within the family unit' (p.178). It also leads to a breakdown of law and order and perpetration of violence.

Halapua's intention in this book is to 'do justice to the complexity of today's Fiji' (p.191). Whether or not he has succeeded is likely to remain a matter for debate. The use of class analysis invariably raises more questions than it answers. As mentioned earlier, there is little discussion of the 2000 crisis and its aftermath. This crisis clearly exposed tensions within the Fijian chiefly establishment, reflecting competing economic and political interests. It also exposed conflicting pressures on the military, with class affiliation or allegiance being perhaps the least salient.

Despite the problems and limitations of class analysis, this book makes challenging and provocative reading. Perhaps most challenging of all is the question that is left to the end: where does the country go from here? Halapua advocates reclaiming the notion of *vanua* 'in its unadulterated and philosophical form' and extending its principle of reciprocity to encompass Fiji's 'multiracial, multicultural and increasingly globalising community' (p.200). An essential step forward, he argues, would be to 'honour the spirit of the 1997 Constitution'. This is a step that some of Fiji's leaders are still apparently hesitant to take.

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