

Unpacking Democratic Transitions: The Case of Fiji

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Executive Summary

The country of Fiji has the institutional framework of a democracy; however, it does not function as such. This report will investigate the reasons for Fiji's weak governmental system and argue that it is due to the ethnic tension in the region. Despite safeguards that have been implemented in an attempt to ease conflict, Fiji has witnessed several coups in recent years. This reality makes Fiji an extremely interesting country to study as it provides an example of a nation struggling to adapt to the Western norm of democracy.

Fiji's location in the Pacific Ocean makes for an interesting dynamic regarding international influence. Many nations, including China and the United States, view it strategically as an important economic partner as well as being of use militarily. Looking ahead, the question of whether Fiji aligns itself more with traditional "western" international partners or continues to look elsewhere, such as China, will be of great consequence.

The Fijian military has a clear presence in political and economic discourse within the region. Fiji, at least economically, benefits from this military enterprise, which continues to bring in wealth from outside its borders. However, surrounding states, though similar in size, contain no standing army, which makes Fiji a unique exception in the area. Notwithstanding its benefits, the military seems to be entrenched with racial and ethnic discrimination toward the Indo-Fijians. And lastly, given that the RFMF is the strongest unit within Fiji, the apparent ethnic oppression continues to aggrandize the historical differences that have persistently plagued Fiji in the past.

Ethnic tension between Indo-Fijians and Ethnic Fijians originates with the British Colonial practices, in which indentured Indian workers were brought to the Island to work on sugar cane plantations. Indo-Fijians have since been viewed as second-class citizens by Ethnic Fijians and have been barred from political participation and land ownership. Indo – Fijians see themselves as equals to Ethnic Fijians, while Ethnic Fijians view Indo-Fijians as interfering visitors on their land, which have been handed down along tribal lines for generations. These ethnic tensions and inequalities between both ethnicity have driven multiple coup's in Fiji and remain an important obstacle to democratization in the country.

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1970, Fiji has suffered four coups: two in 1987, one in 2000 and one in 2006.¹ Currently Commodore Frank Bainimarama heads Fiji's government.² The freedom score according to Freedom House as of 2013 was a five. This represents an improvement from the 3.5 Freedom House assigned in 2007, resulting in part from the military coup in 2006.³ According to Freedom House Fiji's civil rights and political rights ratings are 4 and six, respectively.⁴ These ratings have remained constant since 2007.⁵ A draft constitution, which is currently under review, was submitted to the government in December and an election has been scheduled for 2014.⁶ There are high hopes that Fiji will become a well functioning democracy in the near future, however ethnic tensions continue to rise and violence between ethnic groups continues.⁷

This report focuses on many facets of Fijian society, which have contributed to the country's current political situation. These include: foreign trade and investment, Fijian governmental institutions, the Fijian military, ethnic tensions between Indo-Fijians and Ethnic Fijians, the Fijian economy.

¹ "Fiji." Freedom House. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2013/fiji> (accessed December 27, 2013).

² Ibid.,.

³ Ibid.,.

⁴ Ibid.,.

⁵ Ibid.,.

⁶ Ibid.,.

⁷ Ibid.,.

International Trade and Influence

The Center for Strategic and International Studies quite aptly described the Fijian economy in 2012 as, “lackluster.”⁸ Fiji has maintained a consistent balance of trade deficit, where imports outnumber exports.⁹ In fact, imports of Fiji outweigh its exports by a ratio of 12 to 1; which is extremely high.¹⁰ The export commodities of Fiji are mostly natural resources and agricultural products such as sugar, molasses, gold, fish and coconut oil.¹¹ Fiji’s main export partners for these goods are the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and other Pacific island nations.¹² Fiji must import commodities that it does not have or does not produce itself. These are primarily manufactured goods, petroleum products, food along with transportation equipment.¹³ 33% of Fiji’s imports come from Singapore with other major import partners being Australia, New Zealand and China.¹⁴

Fiji’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation states that Fiji’s trade policy is based on trade agreements of either a bilateral, regional or multilateral nature.¹⁵ These agreements often focus on receiving imports as well as foreign aid in exchange for influence in Fiji through such mechanisms as infrastructure contracts. Since the coup of 2006 that angered many of Fiji’s traditional trade partners in Australia, New Zealand and other ‘Western’ nations, Fiji has implemented a “Look North Policy” that, “aims to forge and strengthen trading relations with countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, China and India.”¹⁶ This has caused foreign influence in Fiji to shift, especially in the direction of China.

Between 2005 and 2012, Fiji’s bilateral trade with China has grown by 350%.¹⁷ This increased level of engagement has provided China with an avenue into the Pacific market which has more than 9 million consumers. Due to this mutually beneficial relationship, China has increasingly invested in Fijian infrastructure.¹⁸ One effective method for attracting foreign investment has been the 13 years of tax exempt status Fiji provides in most business sectors for

⁸ Elke Larsen, “Bringing Fiji Back into the Fold: A U.S. Perspective,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, August 9, 2012, <http://csis.org/publication/bringing-fiji-back-fold-us-perspective>.

⁹ “Fiji’s Trade Policy,” *Republic of Fiji Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation*, 2012, <http://www.foreignaffairs.gov.fj/trade-policy/fiji-s-trade-policy>.

¹⁰ Rachna Lal, “Our bilateral trade with China grows by 350 pc,” *Fiji Sun*, November 11, 2013, <http://www.fijisun.com.fj/2013/11/11/our-bilateral-trade-with-china-grows-by-350-pc/>

¹¹ Central Intelligence Agency, “Fiji,” *The World Factbook*, November 25, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/fj.html>

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “Fiji’s Trade Policy.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Rachna Lal, “Our bilateral trade with China grows by 350 pc.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

investors.¹⁹ This increasing Chinese influence in Fiji has raised some concerns among observers that believe, “China has a well-calculated strategy of displacing traditional Western players in Fiji, most notably Australia and New Zealand.”²⁰ Whether or not this belief is a matter of debate. Some, such as Jian Yang, believe that, “China’s growing influence in Fiji is part of China’s global rise,” but also that, “given its substantial interests in Australia and New Zealand, it is not in China’s interest to increase its influence in Fiji at the cost of its relations with these two traditional players.”²¹ However, nations such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States will surely want to ensure that their influence in Fiji remains due to their strategic and economic interests in the region. These interests are both potentially financially lucrative and militarily beneficial.²² Potentially then, the interests of Fiji’s “Look North Policy” partners will compete with those of its traditional international partners, making for an uncertain future.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jian Yang, “China in Fiji: displacing traditional players?,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 65 No. 3, June 2011, 305.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Joanne Wallis, “The dragon in our backyard: the strategic consequences of China’s increased presence in the South Pacific,” *The Strategist: The Australian Strategic Policy Institute Blog*, December 2, 2013, <http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-dragon-in-our-backyard-the-strategic-consequences-of-chinas-increased-presence-in-the-south-pacific/>.

Political Structure and Institutions

The Republic of Fiji is structured as a bicameral parliamentary system, which is composed of the House of Representatives and the Senate; these institutions are overseen by both the Prime Minister – as the head of state – and President – as head of government.²³ The lower chamber of the Fijian parliamentary system, the House of Representatives, has 71 members which are composed of: 23 seats reserved for ethnic Fijians, 19 for those of Indian descent, 1 for a Rotuman, 3 for other ethnic groups and 25 open seats for individuals of any ethnicity.²⁴ This structure was implemented in July 1998, when the Constitution was revised in an attempt to ease the domestic tensions in Fiji through equal representation.²⁵ The Fijian Senate is comprised of 32 presidentially appointed members. The appointments are the results of the influence of various political elites. The composition is as follows: 14 members advised by the Great Council of Chiefs, 9 appointed on the advice of the Prime Minister, 8 chosen by the opposition leader, and 1 appointed by the council of Rotuma.²⁶

Despite having the institutional framework of a democracy, Fiji does not operate as such. The current government acquired its power through a coup staged in 2006 by Chief Commander of the Armed Forces, Frank Bainimarama, following his disagreements with the previous Prime Minister Laesenia Qarase.²⁷ The military has since embedded itself within the governmental institutions of Fiji. Bainimarama acts as Prime Minister and has used his power to appoint Epeli Nailatikau as the acting President.²⁸ This was possible due to Bainimarama abolishing the Great Council of Chiefs, a body, which was designated by the Constitution with the task of selecting the President.²⁹

The role of race, specifically due to the complex history of this tiny island nation, has become key to the structuring of the Fijian legislature. As previously noted, the House of Representatives, the elected body of the legislature, has pre-determined racial quotas that must be filled.³⁰ This structure was laid out by the 1997 Constitution, composed following the 1987 coup and the removal of Fiji from the Commonwealth.³¹ Readmission into the Commonwealth was permitted solely on the basis of a re-drafting of Fiji's "racially biased"

²³ Fiji." *Central Intelligence Agency*. Accessed November 23, 2013. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/fj.html>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ "Fiji." *Europa World Plus*. Accessed Nov. 24, 2013. <http://www.europaworld.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/entry/fj.dir.2>.

Constitution and governmental structure.³² This was primarily to reconcile the demographic reality of the country – whose population is largely composed of the descendants of indentured Indian slaves brought over before independence was declared – with indigenous Fijian and Melanesian groups. The Republic of Fiji was granted re-entry into the Commonwealth in 1997, despite opposition from nationalist parties.³³ However, the racialized structure of the new Constitution failed to provide stability within the Republic. The political system of the country suffered from three massively destabilizing coups in under twenty years (from 1987 – 2006).³⁴

The legislature and the Constitution have become tools for the maintenance of power by the current militarized regime under Col. Bainimarama. Following the abrogation of the 2009 Constitution and the disbanding of the Council of Chiefs, Bainimarama has essentially been unhindered in his actions. In April 2009 the Court of Appeal found that the interim Government of the 2006 coup was illegal, making a noteworthy stand against the government.³⁵ However, the Court of Appeal was a relatively new body, created by the Constitution of 1997, and this ruling triggered the Constitutional crisis of 2009 and the disbanding of the entire Fijian judiciary by presidential decree, further destabilizing the domestic situation.³⁶ In early 2012, Bainimarama lifted a state of emergency decree that had been in place since the abrogation of the Constitution, leading to beliefs that a semblance of human rights would be restored.³⁷ However, by January 2013, he had scrapped a draft Constitution that was seen as critical to any return to democracy.³⁸ The police and the military have become further extensions of this governmental power.³⁹ Human rights abuses are becoming even more rampant and widespread, and have become seemingly institutionalized as Bainimarama seeks to solidify his hold on power.

Efforts are being made both internationally and domestically to oust the current tyrannical military government. As previously stated, the Commonwealth has suspended Fiji multiple times – first following the coup in 1987, and then in 2009 due to the acting government's refusal to hold an election by 2010.⁴⁰ Severed diplomatic ties have forced Bainimarama to make promises of calling elections in 2014, which could potentially end his

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ "Video of Police Beating in Fiji Prompts Ire." *New York Times*. March 9, 2013.

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/world/asia/video-of-police-beating-in-fiji-highlights-concerns.html?ref=fiji&_r=0.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ "Fiji Profile." *BBC*. Accessed November 23, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-14919688>.

military regime.⁴¹ The current instability within the Fijian government, and the allusion of democracy from the region, is largely due to the instability and racial tensions that have plagued the region for decades. To this point in time, Fiji has not had a steady governmental framework. The tiny nation of Fiji currently awaits an election, which could completely overhaul the government and potentially allow it to operate in accordance with liberal democratic principles. So long as Bainimarama remains in government, with the military and governmental institutions as extensions of his power, and the Constitution remains unaltered, true democracy will continue to elude the tiny island nation. It will prove incredibly difficult for Fiji to pursue democracy while the vestiges of authoritarianism remain so prominent.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Fijian Military

The Republic of Fijian Military Forces (RFMF) serves a very important role in Fiji both politically and economically. Its history dates back to the later 19th century when European officials allied themselves with a prominent warlord named Ratu Lakoban.⁴² The purpose of this coalition was to fend off rebel groups opposed to the British interim government. Over time though, Fiji began shifting its efforts from engaging in baseless wars, to becoming a leader of peacekeeping throughout the South.

Presently, the commander of the RFMF is Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama. Serving under him is both the Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff. The RFMF is divided between a strategic command and a land-force command. The former command is concerned with long-term strategic goals, whereas the latter deals with the operational portion of the RFMF, fulfilling short-term objectives.⁴³ In addition to the soldiers and reservists, there is an engineer regiment, logistic support unit, and a naval convoy.⁴⁴

The size and scope of the Fijian military is vastly different than militaries seen in Western nations. For instance, the Fijian government spends 1.6% of GDP annually on the military, and currently has 3500 active soldiers, complemented by 5000 reservists.⁴⁵ Despite its relatively small size, it is the only country within the region that has a standing army.⁴⁶ The RFMF soldiers are divided among six different battalions, each holding a special duty, both inside and outside of Fiji.

Two of the battalions are stationed overseas involved in peacekeeping missions under the auspices of the UN, serving in countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, East Timor, and Sinai.⁴⁷ The main role of RFMF overseas is to supply both medical assistance to the needy, and provide aid to those in refugee camps.⁴⁸ Many of the troops working under the UN receive remittances and funding from soldiers abroad, which in turn stimulates the Fijian economy at home. The remaining battalions are stationed throughout the Fijian islands, guarding domestic interests rather than foreign.

⁴² "Operational Background," *RFMF Website*, accessed November 23 2013, <http://www.rfmf.mil.fj/History/History.html>.

⁴³ "Republic of Fiji Military Forces," *Asia Pacific Defense Reporter*, accessed November 23, <http://www.asiapacificdefencereporter.com/order-of-battle/fiji>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ "Republic of Fiji Military Forces," *Asia Pacific Defense Reporter*, accessed November 23, <http://www.asiapacificdefencereporter.com/order-of-battle/fiji>.

⁴⁶ Mereani Gonedua, "Fiji's Military Force can only be increased," *Pacific Islands Report*, accessed November 23, 2013, <http://pidp.org/pireport/2013/March/03-21-06.htm>.

⁴⁷ Ramesh Thakur, "Ministate and Macrocooperation: Fiji's Peacekeeping Debut in Lebanon," *Review of International Studies* 10, no. 4 (1984): 269, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097020>.

⁴⁸ "Rumblings of Revolution," *the Sydney Morning Herald*, published October 27, 2007, accessed November 23, 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/rumblings-of-a-revolution/2007/10/26/1192941338637.html>.

However, in spite of Fiji's often celebrated efforts around the globe, the RFMF continues to discriminate against its citizens at home.⁴⁹ The Indo-Fijians (Fijians whose close ancestors were from India) are a widely displaced group in Fiji, and are very much underrepresented in both the government and the military. Among its fulltime members, the RFMF consists of only a handful of Indo-Fijians, which, according to Lieutenant-Colonel Moses Tikaitonga, is only a result of low pay and difficult training.⁵⁰ Whatever the reason, the ethnic unbalance in the military is condemned by both leaders of the UN and international leaders abroad.⁵¹

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⁵⁰ "Rumblings of Revolution," *the Sydney Morning Herald*, published October 27, 2007, accessed November 23, 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/rumblings-of-a-revolution/2007/10/26/1192941338637.html>.

⁵¹ Michael Field, "Fiji Military Recruits Indians to Officer Ranks, Ending 60 Years of Loyalty Questions," *Pacific Islands Report*, accessed November 23, 2013, <http://pidp.org/archive/2002/March/03-07-06.htm>.

Fijian Ethnic Tensions

Fiji's population sits at 896 758 and is comprised indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians, Rotumans and other ethnicities.⁵² The two main groups are the indigenous Fijians and the Indo-Fijians who comprise 57.3% and 37.6% of the population, respectively. Indigenous Fijians are descendants of the original inhabitants of the island nation and the Indo-Fijians are descendants of the indentured Indian workers brought over by European colonial authorities to work on Fijian sugar cane plantations.⁵³ The nation's ethnic tensions surround these two major groups and are a result of a history of racial differentiation and indigenous dominance first implemented by the colonial authorities of the nation and then by the nation's governments following their independence in 1970.⁵⁴

Ethnic tension within Fiji can be linked to the issue of land ownership and the preferential treatment of indigenous Fijians. Fijians value land not only as a potential source of money through cultivation but also "regard land as a sacred inheritance and part of their very identity".⁵⁵ This is reflected in the traditional structure of Fijian community in which land ownership and responsibilities are divided amongst several levels of lineage.⁵⁶ (See exhibit 1) This is also reflected in the historical prohibition of on the sale of land by taking control of land from owners and giving it to the Native Land Trust Board (NLTB).⁵⁷ The NLTB leases land in return for rent and retains 25% of the revenue to cover administrative costs, while giving out 25% to the chiefs of the Nation, and allocating the remaining 50% to the various Mataqalis.⁵⁸ Currently, 83%⁵⁹ of land is owned by indigenous Fijians, while only 8% is considered freehold land available for purchase.⁶⁰ Typically, indigenous Fijians see Indo-Fijians as "unwelcome interlopers brought in on a temporary basis by a colonial power that did not ensure their repatriation"⁶¹ while Indo-Fijians "consider Fiji their home and are offended by the lack of

⁵² United States. The Central Intelligence Agency. The World Factbook.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook-geos/fj.html>.

⁵³ Mazurul, Alam et al., "Accounting for economic development in the context of post-colonialism: the Fijian experience," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 15, no. 1 (2004): 140, journals2.scholarsportal.info/tmp/13319177650376750410.pdf.

⁵⁴ Alam et al., "Accounting," 143.

⁵⁵ Alam et al., "Accounting," 142.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Hazel, McFerson, "Rethinking Ethnic Conflict: Somalia and Fiji," *American Behavioural Scientist* 40, no. 1 (1996): 28 journals2.scholarsportal.info/tmp/3735517118905818287.pdf.

⁶⁰ Alam et al., "Accounting," 141.

⁶¹ McFerson, "Rethinking," 28.

recognition for their major economic and professional contributions and their de-facto second class citizenship".⁶²

Indian indentured workers were first brought to Fiji to work on the sugar cane plantations that were predominantly owned by the Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR).⁶³ Although they worked in near slave like conditions, these workers quickly took control of many spheres of Fijian economic society. Although indigenous Fijians dominated politically, Indo-Fijians quickly dominated sugar cane farming, retail commerce⁶⁴ and entered new commerce opportunities in gold mines, urban works and in other farms.⁶⁵ This has caused indigenous Fijians to resent the economic success of the Indo-Fijians and fearing this economic success, has led the chiefs to exploit racism to ensure the maintenance of their privileges and to foster a belief that the chiefs are the only ones who can guarantee the survival of the indigenous Fijians.⁶⁶

Ethnic tensions in Fiji are a very present reality which endangers the development of democracy in Fiji. Overcoming ethnic tensions and land ownership issues is necessary for a long lasting, functioning democracy being established in Fiji. However, since land ownership is ingrained in the culture of Ethnic Fijians, it remains improbable that land ownership issues will be resolved within the near future.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ R.T. Robertson and A. Tamanisau. "Fiji: Race, Class and the Military." *Development and Change* 20, no. 2 (1989): 204 journals1.scholarsportal.info/tmp/9222069005949703616.pdf.

⁶⁴ McFerson, "Rethinking", 29.

⁶⁵ Robertson and Tamanisau, "Fiji: Race, Class" 206.

⁶⁶ McFerson, "Rethinking," 29.

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<http://www.jstor.org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/stable/20097020>.

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