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**REGIME CHANGE AND REGIME MAINTENANCE  
IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC**

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**Colour, Class and Custom:  
The Literature of the 1987 Fiji Coup**

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**REGIME CHANGE AND REGIME MAINTENANCE  
IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC**

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## Errata

**For text note 41, refer to endnotes 41 & 42**

For text note 42, refer to endnote 43

For text note 43, refer to endnote 44

**For page 34, last paragraph, refer to endnote 45**

**For text notes 44-69, refer to endnotes 46-71**  
(i.e., add two to note number)

**For page 58, last paragraph, refer to endnote 72**

For text note 70, refer to endnote 73

For text note 71, refer to endnote 74

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## COLOUR, CLASS AND CUSTOM: THE LITERATURE OF THE 1987 FIJI COUP

Rory Ewins

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### Preface

This paper is concerned with the dramatic events surrounding the 1987 coup in Fiji. In this respect it is hardly unique: although the coup occurred only five years ago, hundreds of thousands of words have already been published concerning its possible explanations. Rather than attempt to compete directly with those many books and articles, I seek to explain the explanations by surveying the key works on the coup that were available up to late 1990, categorizing the major explanations they give for the coup, and offering my own opinions as to which explanations are the most valuable.

Newer works on the coup will, of course, present somewhat more sophisticated explanations than were offered in the months of confusion which immediately followed May 1987. Readers of this paper should keep in mind the time during which the works surveyed were written; some explanations given weight during 1987 and 1988 are held in considerably less esteem now. I certainly do not wish to suggest that the writers discussed herein should be held to every word they wrote three or four years ago; I imagine, though, that they would continue to defend the broad thrust of their arguments, just as I defend those that I have given here.

Thanks are due to several people who were involved in seeing this paper through to its present form: Richard Herr, who supervised the original honours dissertation and suggested its publication; Trevor Sofield, for extensively discussing the coup with me in late 1990; William Sutherland, for many helpful and interesting discussions about the 'politics of tradition'; Brij Lal and Stephanie Lawson, for their specific advice about this paper and possible areas for its improvement; and Ron May and Claire Smith for their editorial help. Finally, thank you to everyone in the departments of Political Science, University of Tasmania, and Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University.

*Rory Ewins*  
*September 1992*

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## Pronunciation

When the Roman alphabet was adapted to create a written-language version of Fijian, some letters were made to represent consonant sounds quite different from their English-language sounds:

<b>b</b>	is pronounced	<b>mb</b>	as in 'number'
<b>c</b>	is pronounced	<b>th</b>	as in 'the'
<b>d</b>	is pronounced	<b>nd</b>	as in 'lender'
<b>j</b>	is pronounced	<b>ch</b>	as in 'choose'
<b>g</b>	is pronounced	<b>ng</b>	as in 'singer'
<b>q</b>	is pronounced	<b>ngg</b>	as in 'finger'

Vowel sounds are pronounced as are Italian vowels. Thus:

<b>Cakaudrove</b>	is pronounced	<i>Tha-kaun-dro-veh</i>
<b>Cakobau</b>	is pronounced	<i>Tha-kom-bau</i>
<b>Jale</b>	is pronounced	<i>Cha-leh</i>
<b>Penaiā Ganilau</b>	is pronounced	<i>Pen-eye-a Nga-ni-lau</i>
<b>Timoci Bavadra</b>	is pronounced	<i>Tim-or-the Mba-vahn-dra</i>
<b>Qiqiwaqa</b>	is pronounced	<i>Ngging-gi-wahng-ga</i>

## Abbreviations

In this paper the following abbreviations are sometimes used:

<b>CIA</b>	Central Intelligence Agency of the United States
<b>CRC</b>	Constitutional Review Committee
<b>FLP</b>	Fiji Labour Party
<b>FNP</b>	Fijian Nationalist Party
<b>MHR</b>	Member of the House of Representatives
<b>NFP</b>	National Federation Party
<b>RFMF</b>	Royal (later Republic of) Fiji Military Forces



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## THE COUP AND ITS EXPLANATIONS

### Introduction

At ten o'clock on the morning of Thursday 14 May 1987, after only one month in power, the democratically elected government of Fiji was overthrown in a *coup d'état* conducted by the third-in-command of the Royal Fiji Military Forces, Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka.

The morning session of Fiji's House of Representatives had, until then, been quiet enough. Alliance Party Fijian MP Taniela Veitata had been venting his frustration at the defeat in the April elections of his party's government by the Labour/National Federation Party Coalition:

Our chiefs are really the guardians of peace in Fiji. . . . [Mao] said that political power comes out of the barrel of a gun. In Fiji, there is no gun. But our chiefs are there; we respect them (quoted in Robie 1989:218).

Other races, though, Veitata said, had given the Alliance — the party of the chiefs and by implication of all indigenous Fijians — 'a kick in our faces' (quoted in Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:69). 'Fiji belongs to the Fijians', he said, and then, referring to Fiji's other main racial group, 'in the same way . . . India belongs to the Indians' (*ibid.*).

Veitata was interrupted by the entrance of ten masked soldiers, one of whom yelled:

Sit down everybody. . . . Ladies and gentlemen, this is a military takeover. We apologise for any inconvenience caused. . . . Stay cool, stay down and listen to what we are going to tell you (Captain Isireli Dugu, quoted in Robie 1989:218).

Rabuka, dressed in a suit, had been watching from the public gallery. He stood up, walked over to the Coalition's Fijian leader, Timoci Bavadra, and said, 'Mr. Prime Minister, please lead your team down the right' (*ibid.*).

Bavadra looked around at his stunned colleagues, and at the 'immobile faces of the Alliance Opposition seated across the chamber' (Bain 1989:3). 'Very well', he replied, 'Under protest. Come along, gentlemen. Let us comply in a dignified and correct manner' (quoted in *ibid.*). He and his fellow government MPs were led outside at gunpoint and ordered into two waiting military trucks. As they moved off, Bavadra turned to Education Minister Tupeni Baba, another Fijian member of the Labour Party, and asked: 'Is this really happening? A *coup d'état* in Fiji?' (quoted in Robie 1989:219).

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The news shocked a world grown blasé about military takeovers. More than the being the first to occur in the Pacific, Rabuka's bloodless coup had occurred in a country whose smooth transition to democratic self-rule had been held up as a model for the Third World. Australia and New Zealand expressed particular alarm. Fiji was the crossroads of a region in which they considered themselves to play a leading role. Hurriedly-written analyses headlined 'Paradise Lost' and 'Trouble in Paradise' appeared in major newspapers and magazines of the two countries. Television stations matched stock film with spoken reports from a handful of correspondents. Over the next few weeks the media patched together an explanation for Rabuka's actions.

The coup, most reports concluded, was the result of longstanding racial tensions between indigenous Fijians and 'immigrant' Indians; Rabuka had acted on behalf of his race. The print media ran potted histories of the Indian presence in Fiji and described the Labour/NFP Coalition government as 'Indian-dominated'. Subsequent events were interpreted with race in mind: demonstrations staged by the militant 'Taukei Movement' were taken as signs of 'Fijian unrest'; Rabuka's second military intervention in September 1987 was seen to be staged in response to a comeback by the 'Indian' Coalition; an illegal arms shipment was seen as a sign of imminent Indian revolt; and the most notable feature of the new constitution promulgated in July 1990 was considered to be its creation of a parliament biased against Indians.

A campaign of harassment aimed mostly at Indians and conducted mainly by the military<sup>1</sup> and the Taukei Movement has reinforced this picture. Arson, looting, and riots were all initially involved in this campaign, and formed part of a crime rate which more than doubled in the months after May 1987 (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:122-23). On 15 October 1989, in a coordinated effort by a Methodist youth group, four Indian temples in Lautoka were firebombed, prompting a 24-hour strike by Fiji's Indian community (*The Australian*, 16 October 1989; *Fiji Times*, 18 October 1989; *The Age*, 20 October 1989).

The forces of 'law and order' have been equally at fault. In one bizarre incident at a supermarket on 17 July 1987, a senior police official's wife complained of discrimination when given a smaller plastic carrying bag than other shoppers. Police quickly arrived and attempted to arrest the entire staff, eventually making do with the overnight detention of three cashiers (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:124). Reports continue, long after the coup, of arbitrary arrests, beatings, and intimidation. As recently as 24 October 1990, an Indian university lecturer was kidnapped and tortured for taking part in a public demonstration at which copies of the 1990

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constitution were burned. Five soldiers were charged with the assault and pleaded guilty (Paul Murphy, 'Dateline', SBS Television, 10 November 1990).

Most media commentators continue to see in these events the signs of longstanding racial antagonism. Others see more complicated causes. Certain aspects of the coup and subsequent events have prompted some observers, both in academia and elsewhere, to search beyond race for more effective explanations. Suspicions were first aroused when, the day after the coup, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara<sup>2</sup> (prime minister of Fiji from independence in 1970 until his defeat by the Coalition in 1987) joined Rabuka's Council of Ministers, a body dominated by Taukei Movement members. This prompted speculation that the coup was the result of an Alliance plot. That Rabuka quickly yielded power to civilians, rather than maintaining personal control, reinforced the belief that he was acting on behalf of more powerful political players.

Certainly, events went remarkably smoothly for Rabuka. Initial problems, which arose when the governor-general, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, condemned the coup and refused to swear in Rabuka's Council, were more or less resolved within a week. By then Ganilau had dismissed the released Bavadra government, dissolved parliament, granted amnesty from prosecution to Rabuka and his men, and sworn in a Council of Advisors almost all of whom met with Rabuka's approval. Since then, most of the domestic obstacles faced by Fiji's various military-backed governments have been overcome. The destruction of democracy in what is now the 'Sovereign Democratic Republic of Fiji' seems complete.

### **Categorizing the explanations for the coup**

Since 14 May 1987 many explanations for the coup have been advanced. These often conflict with one another. Some are concerned mainly with one factor, such as conflict between Fijians and Indians, while others offer a mixture of factors. In this paper the various factors are grouped into four main categories: race, class, custom, and specific interest.<sup>3</sup> The rationale for this typology is outlined below.

There are several reasons for adopting such an approach. First, apart from a few articles which review half a dozen major texts in less than a thousand words, little attempt has been made to compare and contrast the major works on the coup. Secondly, the exercise of examining each factor is valuable in itself, since it provides a test of each explanation individually. Finally, such a categorization, by highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the main explanations for the coup, helps to isolate the explanation with the greatest validity. The study also gives a measure of the



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vulnerability of liberal democratic institutions in Fiji, and an indication of where Fiji is heading in the 1990s.

## Definitions

Before describing each factor, it is necessary to clarify the definitions of some of the terms used in this paper. The labels used to describe Fiji's inhabitants have long been a source of contention. The label 'Fijians' was applied, from the earliest period of European contact, to the race of indigenous people of Fiji, and since then indigenous Fijians have opposed its extension to include other races. Therefore, inhabitants of Indian descent, even if born in Fiji, are generally known within Fiji as 'Indians' (and were defined as such in its 1970 constitution). Other races are also labelled according to their ancestry (Europeans, Chinese, and so on). The problem of finding a broadly acceptable name for all inhabitants of Fiji remains unsolved.

Some Fiji Indians, in an effort to more closely identify themselves with their country, describe themselves as 'Indo-Fijians'. The term has been adopted by many observers, although it is disliked by many Fijians and has connotations of racial admixture which are inappropriate. Some observers even avoid 'Fijians' as a description of the indigenous people, preferring the term 'Taukei', but in any discussion of the coup, which inevitably will include references to the 'Taukei Movement', the use of 'Taukei' as a broad label causes confusion and obscures the divisions within the indigenous community.<sup>4</sup>

The more common terms 'Fijians', 'Indians', and (when referring to all inhabitants of Fiji) 'Fiji citizens' are used hereinafter. Hence, it is the 'Fiji government', not the 'Fijian government', and 'Fijian voters' refers only to indigenous voters.

A less common label is used for Rabuka's reassertion of control on 25 September 1987, referred to by most observers as his 'second coup'. In this paper, Rabuka's first military intervention of 14 May 1987 is called his 'coup', while his second is called his 'second intervention'. This terminology was suggested by the statements of two coup observers. One is William Tagupa, who says:

A military coup . . . often takes a long period of time to sweep aside the institutional remnants of the previous government. In Fiji, I consider there to have been a single coup, initiated on May 14 and not completed until September 28 when the Republic of Fiji was unilaterally declared (Tagupa 1988:144n).

The other is Sandra Tarte, who says:

This action by the military was not a second coup. The military clamp-down that took place in September . . . did not displace a legal government. There has only been one coup, that of 14 May (Tarte 1987:75).

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The use of the terms 'second coup' and 'the Fiji coups' suggests that one considers the interim governments established after the 'first' coup to have been legitimate (which I do not). It also obscures the differences between the two events, and (in the context of 'explanations of the Fiji coups') implies that the same explanation applies to both, which is not necessarily a valid implication. Events after 14 May which had been caused by the coup in turn affected the events of September and October. Furthermore, the motivations of key players evolved, and pro-coup groups became more fragmented, throughout the months after the coup. But of course, the explanations of the coup examined in this paper do go a long way towards explaining events since the coup.

A note must also be made about the use of the terms 'causes of the coup' and 'coup-makers'. Strictly speaking, the only people who can be called 'coup-makers' with certainty are Rabuka and the few soldiers who took part in his takeover. But to follow this rigid definition is too limiting. Thus, the term 'coup-makers' is here expanded to include those who had a hand in causing the coup and have demonstrated their support for it. These people may not have helped plan the coup, but did give active or tacit support before the event. A second group comprises those who helped to ensure the coup's success after the event (loosely termed 'coup supporters'). A third comprises the members of Fiji's public who approved of the coup. Together, these three groups make up the pro-coup forces in Fiji. Obviously, disagreement exists about who belongs in which category, and the terms are therefore somewhat flexible.

Similarly, the only definite 'causes of the coup' are those which one can be certain motivated Rabuka to act. Therefore they may, according to some accounts, include only a distrust of Indians and a concern for the future of the military. Again, this term is expanded to include many of the forces at work in the events of 1987 (race, class, corruption, and so on). All have played a part in ensuring the success of the coup, and all have been promoted by at least some observers as likely causes of the coup.

Finally, while the pre-coup system of government defined by Fiji's 1970 constitution is often referred to as 'democratic', it must be noted that this was a qualified form of democracy. Representation was defined along racial lines, and minority groups other than Fijians and Indians were over-represented: while only about 3 per cent of Fiji's voters were 'General Electors' (mostly Europeans, part-Europeans, and Chinese), they elected 8 out of 52 (15 per cent) of the seats of the House of Representatives. Worse electoral malapportionment has occurred in Western 'democracies', however, and other symbols of democracy, such as freedom of the press, were present in pre-coup Fiji (and are noticeably absent in post-coup Fiji). Certainly, the imperfect nature of Fiji's past system of government should not

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be taken as justification for its present system. It is in part to avoid this implication that I have retained the term 'democracy' as a description of Fiji's pre-coup form of government.<sup>5</sup>

### The racial explanation

As has been noted, race was the most commonly offered explanation for the coup in the days immediately following 14 May 1987. Most media observers concluded that racial antagonism between Fijians and Fiji Indians was sufficient explanation for Rabuka's success in taking power.<sup>6</sup> Rabuka himself gave racial tensions as his primary justification for staging the coup. In his early announcements, Rabuka declared he had staged the coup for the paradoxical reason that racist elements within the indigenous Fijian community (represented by the 'Taukei Movement') were causing unrest.<sup>7</sup> Later, however, his personal concern about increased Indian power was put forward as his real motive. Rabuka's interpretation of Fiji's race relations was further developed in his own story of the coup, *Rabuka: No Other Way* (Dean and Ritova 1988)<sup>8</sup>, one of the earliest books on the subject to appear. Foremost among Rabuka's fears — and those of Fijians in general — was the perceived threat posed by Indians to Fijian-owned land.

Deryck Scarr, an academic at the Australian National University and the author of several books on Fiji's history, has given a primarily racial explanation for the coup in his book *Fiji: The Politics of Illusion* (Scarr 1988a). His main arguments, well encapsulated by Barrie Macdonald (1990:201), are that 'beneath a facade of racial harmony there were deep-seated tensions between Fijians and Indians, and that the coup was made inevitable by a Fijian fear of dispossession once a government with an Indian majority had been elected'. Some other observers, such as Theo Roy, professor of Politics at University of Waikato, New Zealand, (Roy 1987, 1988) and Dalton West (1988) concur with this view.

Many observers, however, have viewed the race question from a different perspective. Rather than giving race as the main factor involved in the coup, they have given reasons why it was not the main factor. Brij Lal, a Fiji Indian academic, examines the race question in detail. Although he says the importance of race 'cannot be...lightly dismissed' (Lal 1988a:7), Lal systematically argues that Fijian fears about loss of land, for example, were unfounded, given the restrictions within the 1970 constitution upon altering land-use legislation. Others, such as Stephanie Lawson<sup>9</sup> and Robert Robertson and Akosita Tamanisau (1988),<sup>10</sup> have made similar points.

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Clearly, in the light of such literature, the validity of race as an explanation has both divided, and been a dominant issue amongst, coup observers. Race is undoubtedly, therefore, a major factor of explanation. Hence its inclusion as a separate category in this typology.

### **The class explanation**

A second explanation for the coup deals with conflict between the working class and the upper class in Fiji. Economic and social problems experienced by Fiji in the mid-1980s, it is said, led to (primarily urban) working class dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction prompted the formation in 1985 by Fiji's trade unions of the Fiji Labour Party. Labour changed the face of local politics; unlike the Alliance and the National Federation Party, it placed economic and labour problems squarely on the political agenda, and thereby gained support among Indians *and* Fijians. When allied, through the Coalition, with the NFP's Indian racial vote, this broadly-based support for Labour defeated the 'upper class' Alliance, and threatened the Alliance's chances of ever regaining power.

The result, according to this explanation, was an Alliance campaign of disruption leading to the coup. The coup itself is seen as the upper class's method of regaining the political and economic power which it had lost in the April 1987 elections. This explanation forms the basis of the analysis by Robertson and Tamanisau, whose book, *Fiji: Shattered Coups (ibid.)*, is one of the major works in the literature of the coup. Robertson and Tamanisau more or less equate Fiji's 'chiefly bureaucracy' (to use their label) with a Marxian conception of an upper class, and see Rabuka as essentially the pawn of the 'ruling class'.

The class factor has been considered by other writers, both positively and negatively. Some view the language used in a class analysis as inappropriate within the context of the coup. Scarr (1988a:35) denies Labour was or is a working class party; he sees it as urban middle class, and calls it 'a front party for the National Federation Party'. Lal, although giving class conflicts as part of a structural explanation, does not examine this aspect of the coup in detail. Tagupa presents a class picture of Fiji similar to that of Robertson and Tamanisau.

As will be shown, the class factor incompletely explains the motives of the coup-makers. It remains important, however, as it provides the most commonly used framework within which to discuss the rise of Labour, without which there would have been no coup.

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## The custom explanation

Many indigenous Fijians hold the conviction that their community's past must be reflected in the nation's present political system. At the simplest level, this is expressed as a desire for Fijian political paramountcy, recalling days when Fijian interests were paramount in all matters. This is the essence of the racial factor, and a simplistic explanation gives this desire (purportedly held by the majority of Fijians) as sufficient cause for the coup.

The Fijian community's past is, however, reflected in Fiji's politics in more concrete and complicated ways. Social and political divisions and structures from that past have played a role in both the day-to-day politics and the political structures of modern Fiji. These divisions and structures, having evolved from equivalents existing in pre-colonial Fiji, are usually labelled 'traditional', although I have used the label 'customary'.<sup>11</sup>

The view that Fijian custom was highly important in ensuring the coup's success has gained increasing support. Customary divisions within the Fijian community are essentially of two forms, each to an extent overlapping the other. The first is the 'East/West Divide': the 'Polynesian' east has had the upper hand over the 'Melanesian' west in Fijian politics since Cession in 1874. The Coalition's championing of the west, it has been said, gave eastern forces reason to wish it overthrown. A more prominent source of division is the customary chiefly system. With the increasing urbanization of Fijians, the chiefs have faced a threat to their political dominance within both the Fijian community and Fiji. For the chiefs, the FLP (and hence the Coalition) epitomized this threat. It has been suggested, in particular by David Robie (1987) that this prompted a chiefly conspiracy leading to the coups, with input by Mara and Ganilau in their chiefly roles. At the least, it ensured the chiefly support for the coup which was essential for its success.

The role of custom in the coup is discussed by many observers, although some give it more weight than others. Lawson, Lal, Robertson and Tamanisau, and Robert Norton (1990)<sup>12</sup> all discuss aspects of the custom explanation. Scarr, too, gives much information which belongs in the custom category. Curiously, though, he places little importance upon the divisions noted above. Scarr seems to view Fijians as a homogeneous group, with a few minor exceptions of negligible importance.

The custom factor's importance stems from the widespread discussion of the role in the coup of the chiefs and customary divisions. It also stems from the reverence shown by the coup-makers for bodies such as the Great Council of Chiefs, and the increasing role custom has played in shaping post-coup Fiji. The second military intervention and the 1990 constitution, despite the superficial racial

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character of both, lend weight to a custom explanation; indeed, they are difficult to properly explain without one.

### **Explanations involving specific interests**

The three factors of race, class, and custom provide systemic explanations for the Fiji coup. They give evidence that the potential for a coup was part of Fiji's society and its political system. But explanations have also been given which centre on the motivations of specific organizations and individuals, such as the Alliance Party, Rabuka, and Mara. The factor of 'specific interest' is concerned with people and events unique to the time and place of the coup. There are two sub-categories of specific interest: the specific interests of individuals, such as Rabuka, Mara, and Ganilau; and the specific interests of organizations, both internal and external to Fiji, such as the Alliance, the military, and the CIA.

Lal's main explanation for the coup is that it was largely the result of the 'actions and motivations of specific individuals' (Lal 1988a:7). Lawson, and Robertson and Tamanisau, have suggested that individuals within the Alliance and the bureaucracy may have been motivated to support the coup by a fear of being exposed as corrupt by the Bavadra government. Scarr, too, discusses corruption, although he treats it more as the 'clumsy arrogance' of 'a party grown used to power' (Scarr 1988a:47).

Often the actions of individuals and groups can be explained in terms of the categories previously given. An explanation based on personal interests overlaps, to some degree, race, class, and custom explanations. Mara and Ganilau, to take two prominent examples, have personal interests derived from class and custom interests. Purely personal motivations, however, deserve separate attention, even if to demonstrate that they can be explained in terms of other categories. The interests of groups such as the Alliance and the military follow a similar pattern of partially overlapping other categories.

Seemingly somewhat distinct is the possibility of Central Intelligence Agency involvement in the coup. This possibility has been raised in various places, but none of the major works give it much weight. The anti-nuclear policies of the Bavadra government would obviously have been unpopular with the United States, but most question the evidence of US involvement as being too circumstantial.

But even intervention by the CIA, with its hidden agenda for the region, sits comfortably under the 'specific interest' heading. The common thread of all such explanations is that the groups and individuals concerned acted in response to personal circumstances, or to circumstances unique to Fiji in 1987. By implication, they may have acted differently, or not acted at all, under different circumstances.



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The category of specific interest, then, is distinct from those of race, class and custom; and, given the prominence of the people and groups concerned, it is a category of major importance.

### **Assessing the utility of each factor**

In order to establish which factor of explanation for the coup is the most useful, I have looked at events other than those of May 1987. Where appropriate, I have considered events leading up to the coup, their significance (including how they were regarded before the coup took place), and their relevance to a particular factor of explanation. Post-coup developments, such as Rabuka's second intervention, are examined in a similar manner.

A factor's utility can also, in part, be assessed by examining how widely accepted it is within coup literature, and comparing and contrasting the various arguments given for and against that factor. A further consideration is how well a factor can explain evidence given in support of other factors. The final test of its importance is then straightforward. Two questions are asked: 'Was this factor necessary to cause the coup?' and 'Was it sufficient cause for the coup?'

I conclude, after examining the four broad factors of explanation, that a custom explanation provides the best framework within which to discuss the Fiji coup and subsequent events. This is not to say that the other factors of race, class, and specific interest are insignificant. I hope to show, however, that those factors are best interpreted in terms of the motivations and impact of the Fijian community's chiefs.

For any exercise such as this, the study of a wide range of pre- and post-coup literature is essential. It is only through such a broad study that the key issues of importance in the coup, and their level of support among all observers, can be discerned. I have limited my actual analysis to the explanations of a limited set of key observers.<sup>13</sup> It must be stressed, however, that represented among these observers are most of the explanations given for the coup; indeed, this is one reason for focusing on the particular observers chosen. All are prominent within Fiji coup literature. While I have examined a wide range of smaller articles from journals, newspapers, and magazines, they have usually been noted only when their arguments are not covered by the key observers. The citation of articles and books by key observers in preference to smaller articles helps to define the explanations of the key observers. For similar reasons, secondary references (via the key observers) to works written before the coup are sometimes more helpful in this context than primary references.

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The coup and subsequent events have raised many questions about Fiji and its future. Many of these, however, have limited relevance for a study of explanations for the coup. Interesting points could be made about the international response to the coup, the implications that the governor-general-led post-coup 'interim government' had for Westminster conventions world-wide, and the damage the coup inflicted on the Fiji economy.<sup>14</sup> Where appropriate, comment on these areas will be incorporated into this paper, but such comment will be limited. The far-reaching implications of Rabuka's actions inevitably mean that the coup's causes are only a small part of the Fiji coup story.

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## 2 THE RACIAL EXPLANATION

In 1986, indigenous Fijians comprised only 46.2 per cent of Fiji's population of 700,000, compared with 48.6 per cent Indians (the remainder being Europeans, Chinese, and other races).<sup>15</sup> Many among the Fijian community resent the 'immigrant race', as Indians have been labelled,<sup>16</sup> and periodically this resentment has risen to the surface. Much of it is founded on half-truths and racial stereotypes, but it is enough to have an effect on Fijians' perception of politics and the economy. Not surprisingly, then, some observers' reaction to the coup was that it was a demonstration of Fijians' resentment at being governed by an 'Indian-dominated' Coalition.

Racial stereotypes are a feature of Rabuka's narrated account of his coup, *No Other Way* (Dean and Ritova 1988). 'You can't tell with Indians', he says, 'if they're lying or not' (*ibid.*:120). Their basic failing, as he sees it, is that they are not Christians. A strict Methodist (and lay preacher), Rabuka talks of the coup as 'a mission that God has given me' (*ibid.*:11). To Rabuka, Christianity is the foundation of Fiji. He sees the conversion of Indian 'heathens' to Christianity as a valid solution to racial problems (*ibid.*:121).

The Indian threat to Fijian culture is, in Rabuka's eyes, religious and political; population and economic concerns do not seem to come into it. He is quite happy for Indians to 'remain to make money' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:102). In fact, after it became obvious that many Indians were *not* staying after the coup, his government advertised for skilled Asian immigrants to take their place (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, March 1988, p.15). Rabuka sees room for at least 100,000 such immigrants

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(Dean and Ritova 1988:124), possibly from Hong Kong (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:102). Even at the simplest level of race, then, it is questionable whether Rabuka's views would be shared by many Fijians.

Stereotypic views are held by both Fijians and Indians, as Lal describes:

The Indians frequently [see] Fijians as lazy and improvident, living for today with little thought for the needs of tomorrow. The Fijians [regard] the Indians as pushy and insensitive, perennially dissatisfied with their condition and forever demanding a larger share of the cake (Lal 1988a:59).

Foremost among Fijian fears is that Indians are determined to break the Fijian hold on land ownership. Fijian *mataqali*, or 'clans', own 82.16 per cent of land in Fiji, and the crown owns 9.45 per cent (*ibid.*:24).<sup>17</sup> Indians work land leased from the *mataqali*.

An explanation for these stereotypic views lies in Fiji's history. The Indian presence in Fiji stems from the policies of Fiji's first British governor after Cession in 1874, Sir Arthur Gordon. Gordon believed that 'native races had been shamefully exploited in other parts of the British colonial empire' (Roy 1987a:5). To shelter them from this exploitation, Gordon encouraged Fijians to 'live their traditional lifestyle under the watchful care of their village chiefs' (*ibid.*).

Unfortunately, this precluded the use of Fijians as plantation labourers, without which Fiji's colonial economy would have collapsed. A solution was found in the example set by other British colonies in Africa and the Carribean: Indian indentured labourers. The first Indians arrived in 1879, and recruitment ceased only in 1916. Approximately 40 per cent of the 60,000 Indian labourers brought to Fiji returned to India after their indentures expired (Gillion 1962:190). Those remaining formed the basis of today's Fiji Indian population.

This influx was presented as a *fait accompli* to Fijians. To avoid possible conflict which might arise from Fijian resentment of this fact, the colonial government physically separated the Indian and Fijian populations. Restrictions on areas of Indian settlement were in place until the late 1920s, and even today most Indians live in the west and north of Fiji. Political representation for non-Europeans, when it was (gradually) introduced, was communal, with electors voting only for representatives of their own race. A similar system was carried on after independence.

Impediments to integration exist at all levels of society. In 1960 only 6 per cent of schools were officially described as racially mixed (Norton 1977:27). Little has changed since. Primary schools, where attitudes towards other races are made or unmade for life, remained 'mostly racial' after independence (*ibid.*).

Interaction between races among the general population remains slight. The majority of Fijians, over 60 per cent of whom still live in a rural or village environment,<sup>18</sup> would have little contact with the large numbers of Indian cane

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farmers, city dwellers or unemployed. Their contact with Indians is usually limited to that with local small businessmen. As this is almost their only experience of the world of business, a realm in which they feel at a distinct disadvantage, it reinforces the 'Indian control of the economy' stereotype.

A partial explanation for Fijians' view of Indians as 'untrustworthy' has been given by Roy. During World War II, in response to an imminent Japanese threat, Fijians rushed to join the Royal Fiji Military Forces, secure in the knowledge that 'the collective nature of Fijian society provided adequate care for [their] dependants' (Roy 1988:52n). Indians had no such safety-net, and 'were thus virtually bound to their plots'. Unfortunately, their then-leader, A. D. Patel, obscured this 'quite reasonable explanation of their failure to enlist' with an ill-timed direction to Indians not to join up unless their pay was on the same scale as the British Army. This has 'ever since been regarded as evidence of [Indians'] disloyalty or even treachery' (*ibid.*). Significantly, it also led to the RFMF becoming a Fijian preserve.

Roy is one adherent to the view that this long history of 'two human communities...placed cheek-by-jowl in a situation of enforced collaboration' (1987a:9) caused the coup. He notes other explanations, but says 'none seems to be sustainable on any but the most flimsy circumstantial evidence' (*ibid.*).<sup>19</sup> The Indian community, he says, 'sought control by manipulation of a constitutionally based representative system and had the economic power to back its endeavors', while Fijians, 'lacking such resources, fell back on the power of the gun' (*ibid.*).

The most prominent academic argument in favour of the racial factor is Scarr's *Fiji: The Politics of Illusion* (1988a). Scarr's logic is basically that there are significant racial tensions within Fiji and that therefore the coup was inevitable. He never convincingly demonstrates that one follows from the other; instead, he attempts to place beyond all doubt that Indians and Fijians mistrust and dislike one another. To do this, he sometimes resorts to anecdotes (such as Fijian boys knocking Indian boys down in school playgrounds) (*ibid.*:49) and personal observations of day-to-day life in Fiji. His underlying message is spelled out in the book's introduction:

To have watched and intermittently lived in Fiji for twenty-five years was to know how amiable relations were between the two races on the surface. . . . But it was also to know what private reservations were entertained, what active dislike quietly revealed, what Fijian resentment existed, and how little really intimate contact between Fijians and Indians occurred (*ibid.*:xiv).

Were Scarr (and, for that matter, Roy) discussing a mass uprising of Fijians against the Coalition, his analysis would be a telling one. But the coup was the action of a few, not of many, and it is not at all clear that the sections of the Fijian community whose support ensured the coup's success represented all Fijians.

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In his quest to demonstrate Fijians' support for the coup, Scarr examines the role of the Taukei Movement, which was formed in response to (and in opposition to) the Coalition's victory in April 1987. This supposedly popular movement has, however, been discredited as such by other observers. Robie has revealed that although not officially endorsed by the Alliance, the Movement contained Alliance party members and politicians, as well as chiefs, Methodist clergy, police, and members of the military (Robie 1987:12). And although it cloaked itself in anti-Indian rhetoric, the Movement was, say Robertson and Tamanisau, essentially anti-Coalition and pro-Alliance: 'Its leaders were mostly commoners on the fringes of the Fijian establishment who saw the Coalition's election as dashing forever their chances of patronage or power' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:99).<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, the Movement's anti-Indian rhetoric obscured its Alliance links and won it support from some easily-swayed Fijians: 'The Taukeist mixture of fact and myth produced results in a nation where the level of communication is low' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:103). Furthermore, the Movement 'drew upon the Alliance's communal support for its own purposes. This enabled it to claim substantial Fijian support' (*ibid.*:100). The image of public dissent manufactured by the Movement provided Rabuka with a pretext for launching his coup.

But despite increasingly frantic attempts by the Taukei Movement to stir up trouble, opposition to the concept of a Coalition government had been on the wane by early May 1987. *Pacific Islands Monthly* was able to report that 'the "movement" against the government has lost much of its appeal'. More significantly, it reported that:

The new Government also won support from two prominent Fijian backed political groups . . . the Western United Front headed by Ratu Osea Gadivi and the Fijian Nationalist Party led by Mr Sakeasi Butadroka. They urged their followers to accept the new Government because that was the choice of the people (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, June 1987, p.20).

Scarr himself has admitted that the Taukei Movement 'was in effect the nationalist wing of the Alliance Party' (Scarr 1988a:62). This may at first seem to contradict the thrust of his discussion of the Movement: that it was a strong sign of Fijian discontentment with Bavadra's government. It does not, however, because Scarr identifies the Alliance completely with Fijians, and vice versa. To Scarr, only the Alliance truly represented Fijians. He regularly derides the small size of the Coalition's Fijian vote (9.6 per cent, or, as he stresses, 'only 6 per cent of the total voting strength'). He ignores the point that, as a sign of shifting Fijian attitudes, this vote was highly significant. The figure of 9.6 per cent compared with a 0.8 per cent Fijian vote for the NFP in 1982. Furthermore, the percentage of Fijians who turned out to vote dropped from 85 in 1982 to 70 in 1987 (Lal 1988b:91). Many of those

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staying away would have been people who could not bring themselves to vote Coalition but nevertheless wished to protest against the Alliance, a further sign that not all Fijians identified with that party (*ibid.*).<sup>21</sup>

Most observers writing on the influence of race, other than Scarr and Roy, argue that race was *not* the most important factor in the coup. Those who so argue include Robie, Lawson, and Kenneth Bain (1989).<sup>22</sup> Robertson and Tamanisau, in particular, go almost to the opposite extreme to Scarr. Race, they say, is 'the most comfortable explanation for the coups. It neither challenges the intellect nor poses disturbing questions' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:144). Plentiful examples of 'racial accommodation and harmony' existed before and after the coup, they claim, but 'made poorer copy than the stories of racial violence journalists expected and fed upon' (*ibid.*:45).

Robertson and Tamanisau stress that the 'Coalition government was far from being Indian dominated' (*ibid.*:1). The government was half Indian NFP and half multiracial Labour; the prime minister and half his cabinet were Fijian, making the cabinet the most evenly balanced, racially, that Fiji had seen. They also argue that the dominant stereotype of Indians as 'rulers of Fiji's economy' had little basis in fact, citing a World Bank report which revealed that in 1977 Indian families earned an average \$4,003 per annum, while Fijian families earned \$3,998 — a difference of only \$5 a year (*ibid.*:32). In addition, of the 13 per cent of the population unemployed in early 1987, Indians comprised two thirds. Besides, Robertson and Tamanisau argue, 'if Fijians were marginalised, they were marginalised during Fijian rule' (*ibid.*:1). For the Fijians' economic problems, 'Indians became the scapegoat, despite the fact that trans-national businesses and not Indians dominated the country's major economic sectors' (*ibid.*:14). The vast majority were 'working class or cane farmers with incomes roughly equal to their Fijian counterparts' (*ibid.*:1).

Robertson and Tamanisau acknowledge that irrational Fijian fears exist, quoting one Taukei Movement member's claims that 'the Indians will rig the election so that they will always stay in power. They are a very clever and selfish people' (*ibid.*:100). But they balance these claims by quoting more moderate Fijians, such as former MP Kolinio Qiqiwaqa: 'The Indians here are our friends...they won't spoil anything' (*ibid.*:103). As for the Indians' views, they argue that

accommodation was as much a feature of Indian relations with Fijians in the past as it was in 1987. This best explains why, immediately after the coup, a kind of fatalism enveloped many Indians: they talked not of struggle, but of emigration (*ibid.*:102).

Ropate Qalo, in a 1984 study of local government in Fiji, similarly concluded that Indians seemed to have been successfully convinced of the importance of



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maintaining the paramountcy of Fijian interests. He cited several examples of this Indian 'accommodation', and quoted K.C. Ramrakha, a former Opposition Whip:

We Indians hope that the Fijian community will remain united and that we will be able to deal effectively with a leader, or at the very most with a homogeneous group of leaders . . . if the chiefs go, or are divided, who will fill the vacuum that must ensue? (quoted in Qalo 1984:51).

The relatively muted Indian response to the coup and events since seems to support this picture. Karin von Strokirch has given various reasons for the 'low level of popular protest and resistance [and] the lack of co-operation across racial lines' (von Strokirch 1987:37). Among these are lack of leadership for such a campaign (with Coalition MPs initially detained after the coup), the 'combined effect of the emergency regulations and a massive propaganda campaign on the part of the Taukei and the RFMF', and perhaps most importantly an 'overwhelming desire for return to normal life' (*ibid.*:37, 40, 39).

Before proceeding too much further, however, it should be stressed that race has proved important in Fiji's politics in the past. In the 1977 elections, to take a prominent example, a strong showing by the extremist Fijian Nationalist Party split the Fijian vote and lost the Alliance crucial national seats under the first-past-the-post electoral system.<sup>23</sup> The NFP won 26 of the 52 seats in parliament, and was the largest party in the House (the Alliance won 24). The governor-general, Ratu Sir George Cakobau, did invite them to form a government, but then, 'in a period of 45 minutes between the time he agreed to swear in the leader of the NFP and the time the latter turned up for his appointment' changed his mind (Ghai and Cottrell 1990:175). He instead appointed Mara as prime minister, as the member who appeared 'best able to command the support of the majority' (as the constitution required). Certainly, the NFP was seriously divided at the time. But some have hypothesised that the real reason for Cakobau's action was his fear of Fijian unrest; many Fijians had already reacted to the election result with hostility (*ibid.*). Yash Ghai and Jill Cottrell, however, have made the interesting point that:

One might equally argue that the Governor-General's behaviour in 1977 contributed to the sense that an Indian dominated government was unacceptable, a sentiment that was to have such grave consequences ten years later (*ibid.*).

Fiji citizens who followed their country's politics were constantly reminded of the importance of race by political players who had a vested interest in keeping it important. In 1977, Sakeasi Butadroka, leader of the minority FNP, moved in the Fiji parliament that all Indians be deported from Fiji. The motion was lost, but did not go unnoticed by the public. A similar spectacle occurred in a 1982 meeting of the 72-member Great Council of Chiefs, which passed a motion urging that Fijians'

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majority in the House of Representatives be raised to two thirds (*Islands Business*, December 1982, p.18). (As a point in multiracialism's favour, however, this motion, although passed, 'couldn't be held to be the majority view of the Council, since more than 30 members abstained or were absent when votes were counted, and 15 votes were cast against it' (*ibid.*). That this was so in the Council of Chiefs, the voice of the Fijian aristocracy, is not insignificant.)

Mara himself was quite prepared to manipulate racial fears to guarantee Fijian support for his Alliance Party, despite his regular rhetoric about 'multiracialism'. When parliament defeated Butadroka's 1977 anti-Indian motion, Mara abstained from voting. When the Great Council of Chiefs voted on their anti-Indian motion in 1982, Mara again abstained. In September 1986, with an election in the air, Mara was warning a meeting that to vote for Labour would destroy Fijian paramountcy (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1986, p.23). Until 1987 this policy of 'playing the racial card', to use Robertson's and Tamanisau's term (1988:5), worked well, consolidating Fijians' support for the Alliance.

At the heart of Fijians' fear of 'Indian domination' was a concern for their land. Scarr, naturally, stresses the importance of this concern. Robie, although he is far from being an advocate of the racial explanation, has noted that 'in traditional Fijian political language, "land" also means "people": "The people are the land, the land is the people", says a proverb' (Robie 1989:205).

Lal, although not dismissive of the importance of race in Fiji, has disputed claims that Indians were ever a real threat to Fijian-owned land (Lal 1988a:chapter 1). Even had Indians wanted to take over Fijian land, he says, they would have been unable to do so. Attempts by Indians to gain *any* sort of racial advantage would have been blocked by the upper house: 14 of the Senate's 22 members were nominated by the leader of the opposition and the Great Council of Chiefs. Furthermore, any attempt to change the clauses in the constitution which protected Fijian land rights would need a three quarters majority vote in both houses to succeed. Indians alone, with only 22 of the 52 seats in the House of Representatives, could not come anywhere near that majority.

Norton, in a 1977 study, noted that the composition of the Senate was not a ruling which had been forced upon Indians. The largely-Indian NFP had played an important role in setting up the 1970 constitution of Fiji. The NFP first suggested that the Council of Chiefs be made the basis of the upper house, with veto power over 'any legislation threatening the Fijians' land or institutions' (Norton 1977:134).

Scarr (1988a:22) has echoed post-coup Taukei Movement claims that these safeguards could have been negated by the *Crown Acquisition of Land Act*, which permitted the compulsory acquisition of any land 'in such a manner as to promote the public interest', a definition 'open to interpretation by the government'. But Lal

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(1988a:28) counters that this would need express Supreme Court authorization, and only two of the Court's seven members were Indian.<sup>24</sup>

Then, of course, there is the fact that not all Coalition government members were Indian. Three Fijian Coalition members crossing the floor could defeat any bill which changed land laws purely to Indians' advantage. In the circumstances, this would have been a likely result. Labour wished to see a more equitable distribution among Fijians of land rents, but would not have looked favourably on an NFP 'land grab'. The Coalition was united, but not enough to withstand such extreme pressures from within.

Such extreme-case scenarios assume a fierce determination by Indians to dominate Fiji. But the NFP, and especially its leader in the 1970s and early 1980s, Siddiq Koya, persistently denied there were such aims (Norton 1977:133). Although some inevitably complained about land, most of the complaints arose from the situation of an effective monopoly of land lessors being able to raise rents somewhat arbitrarily, and the insecurity arising from most leases being of ten years duration rather than twenty or more.

Showing that Fijians' fears of Indians were largely unfounded, however, does not prove that those fears did not exist. Regardless of the widespread poverty among Indians, prosperous Gujerati businessmen were all too visible to Fijians. Neither was the Constitution a comfort to most. Prior to the coup, no Fijian translation of the document existed. Few knew the extent of its protection for Fijian land rights. Even then, constitutional safeguards, as Scarr points out, were not the point to some Fijians: 'It was the *lewa*, the rule, that counted' (Scarr 1988a:62).

Scarr ends his book with supposedly incontrovertible evidence in favour of his racial argument. On 31 May 1988, twelve tonnes of arms were discovered in a container in Sydney, bound for Lautoka. The middleman for the arms shipments was identified as 'reputed well-known Fiji-born criminal, Mohammed Rasic [*sic*: Rafiq] Kahan', who quickly fled to the UK (*ibid.*:147). Scarr repeats the allegations made by the military-backed government that the arms were intended for use by Coalition supporters, and concludes:

The object of this gun-running seems clear: massive bloodletting. The preparations for civil war should at least have shown Fijians that the Indian community was not as supine as too many Fijians assumed (*ibid.*:149).

Fiji's military and police detained 43 suspects in raids, and eventually charged 21 with arms offences. Three former Coalition ministers were arrested and later released without charge. Rabuka then introduced the retrospective Internal Security Decree, which allowed for the detainment of anybody suspected of 'subversion' for

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up to two years without charge, with an indefinite number of two-year extensions possible (Robie 1989:249-50).

Serious doubt has been cast on claims that the arms smuggling was Coalition-backed. Robie (1989:250) notes Kahan's 'close ties with several leading Alliance politicians, including Apisai Tora, Taniela Veitata and Ahmed Ali', all of whom have been prominent members of post-coup regimes.<sup>25</sup> More significant is the scenario outlined by Christopher Harder.<sup>26</sup> Harder's account of events indicates the involvement of elements of the post-coup government in the affair, and suggests that it was the result of a behind-the-scenes power struggle between Rabuka and Mara, each of whom feared that the increasing power of the other would make himself redundant.<sup>27</sup> This scenario has been publicly supported by Butadroka, who 'charged the pro-Mara faction in association with the Alliance Party and Muslims with responsibility for the smuggling' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1989:227).

Even if the claim of Coalition-backing for the arms shipments is accepted, it lends only limited support to the racial explanation of the coup, as do most of the examples of racial conflict which have occurred since May 1987. Most of this conflict was caused by the coup, not a cause of the coup. The coup has sent Fiji down a path where racism is accentuated and encouraged by those in power, to the extent that Rabuka publicly praises South Africa's system of apartheid (Government of India 1989:18; Robie 1989:251). The racism seen now is far more extreme than any seen in the years immediately before 1987.

What conclusions can be drawn from this study of the arguments for and against the race factor? The first is that it should not be dismissed out of hand as being unimportant to Fiji's politics. The second is that it should not be embraced as the primary explanation for the coup. I would suggest a more integrative explanation: race was an important consideration for the elements of the Fijian community who were behind the coup, and provided them with a powerful rhetorical weapon, but the coup was not caused, as some suggest, by a near-unanimous Fijian antipathy towards Indians.

The Bavadra government's Indian associations did affect it in the eyes of the Fijian public. The surprise, if not shock, at this dramatic turnaround in Fiji politics must have been profound. But most Fijians were, before the coup, prepared to give the Coalition a chance to govern. To some Fijians, however, its *perceived* Indian domination was one of a number of concerns which caused them to seek its demise. Those Fijians were the chiefs and the staunch supporters of the chiefly system.

Lal gives a clue which points to this explanation. After discussing historical examples of anti-Indian sentiments expressed by Fijians, he puts them into context

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by noting that 'we are, for the most part, listening to the words of chiefs and particularly the traditionalist eastern maritime chiefs with little or no experience of multiracialism' (Lal 1988a:63).

It was the chiefs, in fact, who had the most to lose by any increase in Indian power, and the chiefs and their supporters who, as a result, harboured some of the most anti-Indian sentiments. But, as will be shown later, the chiefs were out of touch with Fijian society. Their extremism was not shared by many Fijians. The post-coup regime seems to have been genuinely surprised to learn this:

The military noted the growth in the forces of opposition and were worried. They expected Indian opposition, but not dissent from among Fijians (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:125).

The army had made the same mistake as Scarr: they had assumed that the Fijian community was homogeneous, and was behind them all the way.

Race did, however, provide a rhetorical justification for the coup. It provided the coup-makers with legitimacy in the eyes of many politically naive commoner Fijians. Such Fijians were prepared to put aside any pre-coup grievances against chiefs and the Alliance in the face of the serious threat they had been hearing so much about. Much of this 'threat' stemmed from blatantly false allegations made by Rabuka's regime with the intention of discrediting the Coalition. Before the coup these allegations were made by the Taukei Movement; afterwards they were made by the military and others in power, and appeared in the Fijian newspaper *Nai Lalakai* and the Fijian programme of Radio Fiji rather than their English-language counterparts (*ibid.*). The fear they provoked tapped into a reservoir of Fijian disquiet concerning Indians, and thus prevented a large Fijian backlash against the overthrow of the respected institutions of government and law.

The tragedy of the coup's reinforcement of racism is that seventeen years of independence and 'multiracialism' had, until then, been steadily changing Fijian attitudes. The emergence of Labour, a genuinely multiracial party (a fact which many more familiar with the older Fiji refuse to accept), was merely the first sign of this change. Among young (and particularly young urban) Fijians, multiracialism was more than rhetoric, it was the way of life in Fiji. A sign of this was a post-election and pre-coup poll of Fijians, which showed that supporters of the Coalition government comprised 80 percent of those aged between 16 and 30 years, and 45 per cent of those between 31 and 35 (*ibid.* 1988:66).<sup>28</sup> Significantly, however, older Fijians did not support the Coalition at all. It can be argued, then, that in another ten years Rabuka's coup would not have succeeded; it would have faced not only Indian opposition but opposition from a clear majority of Fijians. As it was, it received tacit support from an unclear majority. This suited the coup-makers well, for, as the

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following chapters show, they had many other goals they wished to see achieved by the coup.

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### 3

## THE CLASS EXPLANATION

A class-based explanation for the coup lies at the heart of Robertson's and Tamanisau's major analysis. Their book *Fiji: Shattered Coups* (1988) is the most detailed yet published about the coup, and their preferred explanation deserves close attention. It is an explanation accessible to Western observers, as it concentrates on aspects of Fiji politics parallel to the central concerns of Western systems: the economy and the labour movement. While other observers address issues raised by Robertson and Tamanisau to a greater or lesser degree, they tend to do so from a different perspective. The *focus* on class seems to be most developed by Robertson and Tamanisau.

Robertson's and Tamanisau's thesis is that 'class forces' caused the coup, and that the main such force which ensured its success was the 'chiefly-bureaucratic class'. Robertson has since stated:

Bavadra and his Coalition government were thwarted by a small handful of malcontents, allied with the military and able to exploit indigenous discontent to their own selfish ends.... Rabuka launched his first coup in order to preserve the integrity of Fiji's ruling class, threatened, he believed, by the election of a new Coalition government (Robertson 1990:116-17).

In *Shattered Coups*, however, it is left largely to the reader to disentangle the thrust of Robertson's and Tamanisau's argument from the mass of detail they present. Their analysis depends heavily on charting the rise of Labour, a multi-racial working- and middle-class party, in the years immediately preceding the coup. Various conspiracy theories surrounding the coup are then discussed, none of which the authors embrace wholeheartedly, and events in Fiji through to Rabuka's second intervention are described. The reader is left to infer, from the discussion of Labour and from the Marxian language used throughout the book, that upper class forces brought about Bavadra's downfall.

The vehicle of these upper class forces, say Robertson and Tamanisau, was the Alliance Party. In the mid-1980s, the Alliance seemed to have an unbreakable grip on power. It had been the governing party in Fiji since independence, had looked after the interests of Fiji's 'ruling class' of chiefs, wealthy Indians and Europeans,



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and had been rewarded with unwavering Fijian support. As long as this support was solid, and a few wealthy Indians and general electors voted along conservative lines, the 1970 constitution's electoral set-up guaranteed the Alliance power.

But the Alliance was more than a Fijian party: it was a class-based conservative party which had done little to address the concerns of Fiji's workers. There had been no need, as the workers had been mostly Indian, and Indian workers did not vote Alliance. By 1987, however, Fijians also had reason to complain, as Robertson and Tamanisau demonstrate by detailing the Alliance's neglect of the economy. In 1982, 18 per cent of the country's households — over half of these Fijian — were living beneath the poverty line. Unemployment had reached 13 per cent, a large proportion being young people. In 1986 one in every eight Suva residents lived in a squatter colony. With no welfare system, those Fijians outside the village support system felt the affects of these problems acutely (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988).

Poverty had led to increased crime, with a doubling of rape offences between 1985 and 1986, and a 37 per cent increase in burglaries and break-ins. The Alliance's response was to support the establishment of Neighbourhood Watch schemes. In 1985, 72 per cent of prisoners were Fijians (*ibid.*:30-31). Until the formation of the Labour Party, these issues had received little attention. The NFP, itself more business-oriented than working class, was seen as little help: 'There was no voice in the Parliament to raise the kind of issues which concerned the union movement' (*ibid.*:22).

To fill this vacuum, the Fiji Trade Union Council launched the Fiji Labour Party on 6 July 1985. At first, Labour's objective was a modest one: to win power by 1997. But a string of local council election successes revealed a strong reservoir of community support, and in the process pointed to dangers: by splitting the non-Alliance vote between FLP and NFP under the first-past-the-post system, Labour could guarantee a landslide Alliance victory in the 1987 elections (*ibid.*:36).

Initially Labour rejected the solution of a coalition with the NFP; in June 1986 Bavadra referred to a possible coalition as 'an alliance that could never work' (*Islands Business* June 1986, p.21). But after months of discussions within the FLP and between the two parties a coalition was accepted, not only as a means of unseating the Alliance, but also as protection against the devastating effects of an Alliance landslide win. Ideological differences between both sides, however, remained (*Pacific Islands Monthly* February 1987, p.19).<sup>29</sup>

In the months before the election, Labour confronted the public, both Fijians and Indians, with problems which had never been addressed and opinions which had never been properly aired:

Like a true opposition party, it focused on issues that were of immediate concern to the nation's people. If the Alliance reacted with hostility, it was

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largely because it was unused to facing an alert and assertive opposition (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:39).

Labour rejected the conventional 'blame the Indians' explanations for Fiji's poor economic performance: it laid the blame squarely at the feet of the Alliance. The FLP was not challenging Fijians, as it needed their votes to win. But 'it did challenge the Alliance's claim to be the sole representative of Fijians' (*ibid.*:6). In October 1986, Timoci Bavadra claimed that:

The bulk of the population has been disappointed. There is greater migration... Unemployment is high, crime is increasing, mismanagement of government money is seen in every department. There is a strong feeling of disillusionment and disenchantment with the present government (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1986, p.22).

On such sensitive issues as land rights, Labour stressed its commitment to protecting the interests of the common Fijian: 'Labour did not question land ownership, only its class control' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:48). It exposed cases of Alliance government neglect of these same Fijian interests, outlining, for example, 'how Nasomo land at Tuvatruva was given to the Emperor Gold Mining Company without consideration of rentals or compensation for the Nasomo people' (*ibid.*).

Labour's policies attracted those Fijians who had left the village system and felt left out. Some were rural workers, but most were young, educated, and primarily urban, a section of Fijian society increasing in numbers (by 1986, 38.9 per cent of Fijians lived in urban areas — Lal 1988a:49). When allied with Indian Coalition supporters, they toppled the Alliance; the 'racial card' which had kept the Alliance in power for seventeen years had been lost. Fijian support for the FLP was enough to keep the Alliance defeated for some time. The FLP, then, conclude Robertson and Tamanisau (1988:14), 'represented the most complete challenge to the position of the chiefly bureaucratic class in the 20th century'. One could add that its particular threat was its potential as a *continuing* challenge to the chiefly class, as opposed to the sporadic challenges seen previously.

Robertson and Tamanisau expand their class picture of Fiji by adding to it the reactions of pro-Coalition forces after the coup. Under the sub-heading 'Confronting Class Forces', they discuss the most prominent protest against Rabuka's regime: the cane-cutting strike. The sugar industry is vital to Fiji's economy, and most of its 48,000 employees are Indians. Cutting and crushing for 1987 should have begun on 19 May, but 'by mid-June the cane was still in the fields and flowering' (*ibid.*:119).

But the cane-cutting strike was not a particularly strong example of the multiracial class forces which, Robertson and Tamanisau stress, the FLP helped unleash. It began as a response by a sizeable part of the Indian community to

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Rabuka's racial rhetoric. It seemed to many Indians that the coup was aimed at them alone. Cane farmers, therefore, resented pressure from the interim government: 'They are asking us virtually to give up our political rights and in the same breath they are asking our sugar farmers to save the country's economy' (*ibid.*).

Neither could the strike be seen as a wholly political action. Farmers 'differed widely in their reasons for refusing to harvest' (*ibid.*:120). Many were trying to bargain for economic security. A set of farmers' demands made on 10 June was economic in nature, and included payment of the full forecast price for cane plus the cancellation of some old debts. The Fiji Sugar Company finally called the farmers' bluff by closing its mills for one month. Pro-harvest factions among the strikers gained in numbers, and by mid-July cutting had begun.

Tagupa's (1988) study of the coup, although much shorter than Robertson's and Tamanisau's, has some parallel themes. He spends considerable time examining the 'politicization of class' in Fiji. Tagupa defines class as 'a social and economic category that results when a group feels and articulates that its common interests are different from, if not opposed to, those of others' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:131). Class is useful, he says (quoting William Reddy) as a tool for 'analyzing the social structure of societies in which "money and monetary exchange are the principal determinants of one's social position"'. He states that 'the 1987 elections were an unequivocal expression of increasing class development in Fiji'. The coup, in Tagupa's opinion, was the result of conflict and interaction between 'the traditional *taukei* elites and their nontraditional and neotraditional counterparts' (*ibid.*:133).

Among other observers, Lal (1988a) also notes 'class conflict' as a factor in the coup, but does little in *Power and Prejudice* to follow this line of inquiry. Indeed, the elements which Robertson and Tamanisau treat in greatest depth — Fiji's economy in the 1980s, and the rise of Labour and the Coalition — are almost ignored in Lal's book.<sup>30</sup> Lal did discuss the same issues in a 1986 study of the FLP (Lal 1986), and probably did not think it necessary to repeat the information. By not doing so, though, he misses the opportunity to explain exactly how class conflict motivated the coup-makers.

The most prominent attack upon the class picture of Fiji has come from Scarr, who disputes Labour's 'working class' credentials. He characterizes the FLP as 'a middle-class urban-based, salaried-people's party, mildly left-wing (Scarr 1988a:34), and dismisses it as 'a front party for the National Federation Party' (*ibid.*:35). His evidence for the latter (the defection of many NFP members to Labour) ignores Labour's origins and early history. With the former claim, however, Scarr has a point, as he does when questioning where the funding for the Coalition's many election promises would have come from. Neither point, however, invalidates

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Robertson's and Tamanisau's claim that Labour was seen as a threat by the ruling class.

At times it seems Robertson and Tamanisau are attempting to give weight to their class-based analysis merely by using appropriate language: for example, the ruling class, they say, was 'a coalition of disparate class fractions (the Fijian chiefly-bureaucratic class, and Indian, European, and metropolitan bourgeoisies)' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1989:218). Their study of the forces opposed to Labour focuses on the 'chiefly-bureaucratic class'. This makes their dismissal of the 'tribal conspiracy theories' surrounding the coup seem somewhat incongruous. They see the coup-makers' allegiances as 'political, not tribal; their motivation the restoration of Fijian ruling class authority' (Robertson and Tamansiau 1988:98-99). But when the main feature of that ruling class is its 'chiefly' element, it is difficult to see how an analysis focusing on chiefly institutions is less adequate than a class-based analysis. A similar objection can be made to Tagupa's 'traditional elites versus nontraditional counterparts' language.

There may be, nonetheless, plausible reasons for using a class analysis. Such an analysis accounts for the members of Fiji's elite who do not fit the 'chiefly' label. Prominent Europeans and Indian businessmen have no chiefly status; neither do educated commoner Fijians. But members of these non-chiefly groups have played key roles in Fiji's politics before, during, and after the coup.

A closer examination of the nature of their roles, however, reveals that they are less influential than their supposed 'ruling class' status would suggest. In economic terms, there is no doubt that many Europeans and Indians are successful capitalists and hence 'upper class'; commoner Fijians rising to the upper echelons of the civil service may also warrant this label. But in political terms, they are largely subservient to the chiefs. Their political power extends only to the limits set by the chiefly elite.

A telling example is provided by the pre-coup political institution of the Alliance's Indian Association. The Alliance had established Indian and General Electors' Associations as evidence of its multiracialism. The bulk of its support was Fijian, though, and the lesser Associations never enjoyed equal status with the Fijian Association. Given that some Indian and general elector support was necessary for the Alliance to win a parliamentary majority, one would have expected the lesser Associations to command considerable leverage within the Alliance. But the leverage worked the other way, if anything, and the Indian Association, consisting of Gujerati businessmen and minority Muslims, could often do little more than voice its protest against government excesses.

The Indian Association's powerlessness was particularly obvious at times when the government was 'playing its racial card', and at no time more so than after the

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1987 elections. At a meeting held on the Easter weekend, the Fijian Association, incensed at an 'Indian' victory, proposed to march to the governor-general and demand constitutional changes. Calls for Mara to 'show respect for Indians in the Alliance' by condemning the proposal met with silence. As events unfolded, 'members of the Indian Alliance watched with horror as the multiracialism of their party was rapidly stripped before their own eyes' (*ibid.*:64-66). The real extent of their influence was made painfully clear.

Perhaps a stronger point in favour of a class analysis is that it provides a suitable framework within which to discuss the deteriorating Fiji economy of the early 1980s and the resulting rise of the FLP. Without the latter there would almost certainly have been no defeat of the Alliance in 1987, and therefore, of course, no coup. But Robertson's and Tamanisau's focus on the FLP (which is their book's strength) raises a critical question about the class analysis: it admirably explains the background and motivations of the *losers* in the coup, but does it explain the motivations of the *winners*?

Robertson and Tamanisau's thesis is that the coup was the reaction of the ruling class to events which promised to deprive it of political and economic power. Cast in these terms, it appears equivalent to any upper class, anywhere in the world, repressing the lower classes to maintain its own wealth and privilege. But such a picture of Fijian society carries false implications. It implies that the 'chiefly-bureaucratic fraction' of the ruling class was maintaining its 'chiefly' status as merely a front to keep the commoners happy while it consolidated its fortune. It is much more likely that the chiefs, if they thought about it at all, considered their personal wealth to be a happy fringe benefit of chiefly status; moreover, it must be remembered that far from all chiefs are wealthy, and few personally wield great political power.

Bavadra and the FLP believed that Fiji's politics had come of age, and that the time was right to address questions of economic imbalance and workers' rights. Many Fijians and Indians agreed; the coup-makers did not. Those evicted from power by the coup, and those staging the coup, lived in different worlds. Bavadra's government reflected its educated and modern origins in its class-based analysis of Fiji's problems and in its welfare-state solutions. To the Coalition's Indian members, the chiefly system was meaningless, while to its Fijians, the system was a symbol but little more. To the coup-makers, however, the chiefly system was a major part of their world-view. Any chiefs among them — even (and perhaps especially) those from the highest levels — carried with them a lifetime of inculcation of the importance of the system of which they were a part. Members of the 'chiefly bureaucratic class' would have the chiefly system uppermost in their minds.

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How, then, could they accept a Labour view of Fiji? Labour's class model implicitly rejected their chiefly model as anachronistic. To allow such views to gain popular (Fijian) acceptance would be to undermine their entire position. Even if, then, the coup-makers can be labelled in class terms, their motivations were more than those of 'protecting wealth and political power'; in part, they were rejecting the very model of class itself.

Part of the despair the coup provoked in many observers was caused by its implications of 'turning the clock back'. Many Fijians had been on the verge of embracing a modern (non-racial) 'working class versus propertied class' view of Fijian politics; the coup reversed this trend, and consolidated an archaic 'hereditary chiefs ruling commoners' view among Fijians.

The class analysis of the coup, at least as offered to date,<sup>31</sup> uses the wrong language to describe the motivations of the coup-makers. Indeed, it suggests strongly that a custom analysis is a more fruitful line of inquiry.

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## 4

### THE CUSTOM EXPLANATION

The roots of the custom explanation for the coup reach back to Fiji's earliest recorded history.<sup>32</sup> Pre-colonial Fiji, a melting pot of ancestral Polynesian, Melanesian, and Western Polynesian influences, had a strong tradition of chiefly rule. Differences existed between the methods of social organization of western and eastern Fiji: the chiefly hierarchy was especially well-developed and entrenched in the essentially Polynesian society of the east, less so in the more Melanesian west. By the nineteenth century, warfare was virtually continuous and the dominance of one group over another was only ever temporary.

The act of ceding Fiji to Britain in 1874 was a desperate attempt by one high chief, Ratu Seru Cakobau, to maintain power. Cakobau had made his base in Bau the most powerful confederation in Fiji, but this was at risk from various quarters. Important among these threats was that from the Tongan chief Ma'afu, based in the islands of Lau, who had formed an alliance (the 'Tovata') with the chiefs of Cakaudrove (Northeastern Fiji), and was posing a challenge to Cakobau's pre-eminence. Cakobau's gamble paid off. The presence of the British halted these grand power struggles.

Cession had two dramatic effects on traditional Fijian society. The first was to freeze the power struggle at its 1874 'state of play', with Bau pre-eminent. The



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Tovata, which may otherwise have soon gained the upper hand, was forced to acquiesce to cession, and the west was taken to be of little importance. The Bauan dialect became the national form of the Fijian language. Bauan, Cakaudrove and Lauan chiefs formed the hub of the colonial Fijian aristocracy. In some cases, areas of Fiji which had only recently been defeated in battle by another area were permanently recorded by the British as being 'vassals' to their (otherwise temporary) conquerors. Finally, 'Fijian lands, or what was left of them after the chiefs had enthusiastically sold those of their enemies' (Routledge 1985:218),<sup>33</sup> were decreed by the colonial administration to be inalienable.

The second effect of Cession was the restructuring of the chiefly system itself. Governor Gordon wished to retain chiefly paramountcy, mainly for romantic reasons noted previously, but also because Britain was concerned with administering the colony as cheaply as possible. By introducing a system of 'indirect rule' through the chiefs, the British simplified the task of controlling the Fijian population (Roth 1951).

The old system of chief-selection was, however, no longer viable. Previously, a chief, though noble by birth, often gained elevated authority through violence, and if he proved a poor chief, lost it through violence, either at the hands of his own people or at the hands of a conquering army. The British might have avoided many problems had they introduced some form of 'negotiated' selection of chiefs. But instead they adopted the system they knew best, that of heredity. After the 1870s, a chief came from his region's 'chiefly family', the title essentially passing to his eldest son. Unless things went very wrong, he held the title for life.

The British had created Fiji's own 'aristocracy' — a group of families thrust into high positions and kept there by virtue of lineage. With the passage of time, these families intermarried and consolidated their position.<sup>34</sup> They increasingly came to identify their own interests with those of the nation, at the same time as those interests were in fact gradually diverging.

As the twentieth century progressed, the chiefs, and in particular the eastern chiefs, developed a community of interests with Fiji's European population. They experienced only a few minor challenges to their pre-eminence among Fijians, and these were all overcome. Thus, in 1970, the chiefs, through the Alliance Party, inherited the reins of government of the newly independent Fiji, under a system designed to guarantee them power through an electoral coalition of Fijians and Europeans.<sup>35</sup> As was discussed previously, the chiefs formed the heart of independent Fiji's ruling class, and in fact were its most distinguishing feature.

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### *Chiefly dominance and power*

The importance of the chiefs and therefore of custom in Fiji's politics has been stressed by many observers, and many link it directly to the coup. Foremost among those who do are Lawson and Norton, but information relevant to this explanation can be found in works by Robertson and Tamanisau, Lal, Bain, Anthony van Fossen (1987), as well as others. Custom was, however, largely neglected by journalists at the time of the coup. A notable exception was Robie, who wrote in July 1987:

It is the changing attitudes among indigenous Fijians that the chiefly aristocracy fear as the primary threat to their power and authority, not the Indians (Robie 1987:12).

The chiefs' dominant position among Fijians was coming under threat, and in the mid-1980s these threats were epitomized by Labour. Lawson has succinctly stated the problem for the chiefs which then arose:

The coalition under Bavadra's leadership sought to break down the constraints that had been imposed on political discourse by the perpetuation of the plural society syndrome and to draw attention to a community of interests between ordinary Fijians and Fiji Indians. This constituted a major threat to the foundations on which chiefly power in the modern sphere of democratic politics was dependent (Lawson [Hagan] 1988a:1).

For most of the century of colonial rule the overwhelming majority of Fijians remained loyal to their chiefs. The absolutist nature of chiefly rule, says Lawson, was 'reinforced on the one hand by the early policy of indirect rule based on eastern structures and requiring a strong chiefly system and, on the other, by lingering superstitious fears' (*ibid.*:14). Fijians had limited opportunity to escape this system: even into the 1950s, Fijians settling in towns 'could by law be returned to their villages' (Bain 1989:14). In 1956, 73 per cent of Fijians still lived in villages, with another 16 per cent in rural areas, and those who lived outside villages (in breach of regulations) maintained their customary links (Ward 1987:35). But by 1976, only half of all Fijians lived in villages. The other half found links based on village activities harder to maintain, and the chiefs' presence became less easily felt. Fijians were gradually reducing the importance of the chiefly system in their lives.

Some who still lived in villages were also becoming disillusioned. According to custom, the chiefly post carried with it many responsibilities for looking after the village. With increasing governmental administration, this role waned, and some chiefs even became 'absentee nobles', living in Suva or other centres. With chiefly selection largely hereditary, chiefs became less accountable to their villagers, and

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some neglected their responsibilities. Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau noted this problem in 1982:

[If the chief] neglects his own chiefly obligations, his power begins to wane. He won't be able to get things done, and that unfortunately is what is happening in some places today (quoted in Keith-Reid 1982:15).

Ganilau agreed that 'some commoners were questioning chiefs in a way that hadn't been customary before' (*ibid.*:16). Allegations of official corruption which arose in the mid-1980s (see section 5, this paper) did nothing to ease this problem.

As was discussed earlier (see pp.13, 19–20), the perceived Indian threat to Fijian-owned land was of concern to many Fijians. But problems arising from chiefly management of that land also contributed to discontent within the Fijian community. Nearly a quarter of all rent for Fijian land goes directly to the chiefs. Gerard Ward, in a pre-coup study, recorded that:

If the mutual obligations . . . were observed, much of this 22.5% might be used for the common good. . . . Often it is not. Rents from communal land have made some individuals very wealthy (Ward 1987:43).

Robertson and Tamanisau note a further problem with land ownership, raised by Labour's Krishna Datt in 1986:

Some mataqalis, he claimed, had only two or three members, yet owned thousands of idle acres. Others with a large number of members had little access to land (quoted in Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:33).

The problem went back to Cession. *Mataqali* which had many members in 1874 shrank over the next century while others grew, yet land ownership did not change with population. Before Cession, it would have done so automatically, through accepted mechanisms and warfare.

Labour planned to address these problems by encouraging the use of unused crown, freehold, and native land (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1986, p.22). In July 1986 Bavadra said:

Steps must be taken to nationalise the benefits derived from land use in Fiji . . . so that all Fijians not just a few benefit . . . We must discuss means to achieve a more equitable distribution of income from rent within the landowning group as well (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:32).

Such talk, it has been argued, horrified those chiefs who were busily spending their rent for personal gain, and those who ruled over a mataqali with a few people and a large amount of land. Other chiefs saw the moves as a threat to the entire chiefly system. Unfortunately, Bavadra did little to dispel their fears, at one meeting saying 'the Fijian people . . . should question whether they can continue to entrust their future in such leadership' (quoted in *ibid.*:34). Ironically, Labour's 'tradition-

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threatening' land-use policies would probably have provided a closer approximation to pre-1874 usage than the post-colonial system had achieved.<sup>36</sup>

*The 'east/west divide'*

Another major source of discontent has been the 'east/west divide' — the divergence in interests of Fijians in the central and western areas of Viti Levu on the one hand, and Lau, Vanua Levu, and the eastern coast of Viti Levu on the other. This division has its origins in the politics of the pre-Cession era, and since then has been accentuated by the political dominance of the eastern chiefs. The colonial government exacerbated the problem by settling Indians mainly in the west and then proceeding to develop the 'Fijian' east at its expense. Cane farming, gold mining, forestry, and tourism have all largely been based in the west, yet governments since independence have continued the pattern of eastern favouritism (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:15–16).<sup>37</sup>

The major vehicles of Fijian rebellion against chiefly dominance have all drawn strength from the east/west divide: Apolosi Nawai's 'Viti Kabani' of the early twentieth century; the Western United Front party of the 1970s and 1980s; the Fijian Nationalist Party under Butadroka (an opponent of eastern chiefly dominance);<sup>38</sup> and in 1987, the Labour Party. Robertson and Tamanisau, stressing the economic aspects of the east/west divide over its customary roots, have championed this explanation for Labour's unpopularity with the ruling class. Labour, they say, 'deliberately set out after 1985 to inherit the tradition of western discontent' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:17). In fact, the majority of observers have given the east/west divide at least some weight in their explanations of the coup. This is hardly surprising, as the problem's importance had already been firmly established by pre-coup literature. In the face of this almost total consensus, then, Scarr's dissension seems almost capricious:

The relatively mild linguistic and cultural divide running north-south across . . . central Viti Levu is sometimes made to bear a heavier political weight than it will carry (Scarr 1988a:3).<sup>39</sup>

It is possible that Scarr considers the support shown by western chiefs for the coup to be evidence of the east/west divide's unimportance. Today's western chiefs have, however, shown that they consider themselves to have more in common with other chiefs (even those from the east) than with commoners (especially Labour supporters).<sup>40</sup> They have attempted to use the coup as an opportunity for their own advancement: as Lawson (1990:15) notes, 'a group of western chiefs (and supporters of the old Alliance)...proposed a fourth confederacy for the [western] Yasayasa-Vakara provinces', to match the existing confederacies of Tovata, Burebasaga, and Kubuna.<sup>41</sup>

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Nicholas Thomas has questioned whether there actually has been any 'tradition of western discontent'. His main objection to the concept of the 'east/west divide' is that movements based in the west have each drawn strength from different regions and different causes of unrest. Thomas also points to conflict between regions of the west, and the actions of western chiefs just discussed, as signs that the area is not 'unified' in its opposition to the Alliance and the east. But this reasoning overlooks the many cases where internal divisions within a group have been outweighed by common interests.<sup>42</sup>

Thomas also states that

it is questionable whether the 'tradition of western discontent' can be regarded as a unitary historical phenomenon. The 1876 uprising in the western interior did involve the issue of political autonomy ... but also reflected a long precontact history of tribal warfare (Thomas 1990:134).

Thus, by his implication that tribal divisions established before European contact have little to do with modern Fijian and Fiji politics, Thomas dismisses the very foundation upon which the east/west divide has been built. In view of the evidence presented hereto, such a dismissal is quite unjustified.

For various custom-based reasons, then, (as well as the previously discussed reasons of race and class) Labour, and hence the Coalition, was seen as a threat by Fiji's chiefs, and its eastern chiefs in particular. Bavadra himself served as a constant reminder of that threat. Bavadra's home was a small village in the west.<sup>43</sup> He was head of an *itokatoka* (a subgroup of a *mataqali*), and married to a member of a minor chiefly family, but to all intents and purposes was a commoner. As Robertson and Tamanisau (1988:106) put it, commoners were at best to be tolerated, 'as long as they did not attempt to usurp Mara's chiefly position to all Fiji. The father of independent Fiji should not be defeated by a commoner'.

What, then, was the chiefly reaction to the Coalition's election victory? They must have seen it as an attack on all that was dear to them. A sizable minority of disillusioned Fijians had abandoned the chiefly party — the Alliance — for the first time. Many were westerners, and westerners 'descended on Suva to celebrate Bavadra's win' (Norton 1990:135). Bavadra (quoted, *ibid.*:134) had said that 'the chiefly system should be separated from democratic politics', and seemed to be in a position to put his words into effect, at a time when, says Lal (1988a:51), the chiefs 'in recent years had begun to harbour ambitions of enlarged roles for themselves in modern politics ... they wanted to be the chiefs of all of Fiji, not just of the Fijian people'. Bavadra's attempt to demonstrate his respect for tradition by visiting the Vunivalu of Bau, Ratu Cakobau, would have done little to quell this chiefly unrest. At an Alliance post-election dinner, says Scarr, the Tui Vuda, Ratu Sir Josaia Tavaqia, 'was seen to beat upon the table in his sense of frustration at the chiefs'

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government's being overthrown by a man of lesser rank from his own village' (Scarr 1988a:39).

The official reaction from the three most prominent members of the Fijian chiefly system, Mara, Ganilau, and Cakobau, was outwardly one of calm. Mara wished the new government well (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, May 1987, p.11), and Ganilau and Cakobau urged Fijians to respect the people's choice (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, June 1987, p.19; although dated June, this issue was prepared before the coup). Such statements from such highly-ranked chiefs would have placated many unhappy Fijians, and probably helped the new government gain acceptance at first.<sup>44</sup> Adherents to the custom explanation, however, say that behind the scenes many chiefs and their supporters were working to aid the Coalition's demise.

According to Robie, their main tool was the Taukei Movement: through it, 'the chiefly elite had seized on racism as a desperate means of retaining their political domination' (Robie 1989:217). Robie has gone into some detail about the tribal and even family links of various members of the Movement and other players in the coup, many of whom owed their loyalty to the Tovata confederacy. But the possibility of a tribal conspiracy has been downplayed by Robertson and Tamanisau:

Close relationships characterize the Fijian ruling class and not only of the sections supportive of the coup. . . . The coup network was not exclusively Tovata-based. . . . Representatives from other regions were also prominent. . . . Their allegiance is political, not tribal (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:98-99).

For champions of the east/west divide and the theory that eastern chiefs were behind the coup (although they explain this in class terms), this seems a curious criticism to make. Robie's claim is that a network of supporters of the chiefly system orchestrated the coup. As the chiefly system favours the east, Tovata people were prominent in this network. But the chiefly system has many supporters outside the east; the presence of 'representatives from other regions' in the network therefore hardly contradicts Robie's thesis.

#### *The Taukei Movement, Rabuka and chiefly authority*

Robertson and Tamanisau themselves state that 'the Taukei movement was derived from the old Fijian ruling class and replicated many of its tribal and kinship features' (*ibid.*:98). But they qualify this description, as do others: the Taukei Movement was largely a commoner movement. It had some chiefly members, but no high chiefs; its interests, while closely aligned with those of the chiefs during April and May 1987, were not identical with eastern chiefly interests. Since the coup, the power struggle between the Taukei Movement, the eastern chiefly elite, and Rabuka (who has aligned himself with one or the other as necessary for his own purposes) has become complicated. This is little surprise; now that the Coalition and

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Indians have been almost completely removed from the political picture, internal divisions within the pro-coup forces have had room to develop and become obvious. Some in the Movement have even complained about the high chiefs' domination of the Republic's government, embracing the same concept (that high chiefs should remain separate from politics) which caused Bavadra so many problems. In all of these machinations, the Movement, Norton says, has resembled 'earlier episodes of ethnic militancy', in that it has been 'unable to promote a Fijian ethnicity separately from the ideology and symbolism that affirmed the legitimacy of chiefly leadership' (Norton 1990:147).

But after the April election and at the height of the coup, these problems were yet to emerge. The Taukei Movement was then staunchly pro-chief. At its first meeting a prominent Kubuna chief lamented that 'Ratu Mara's government has been defeated and so all the chiefs in the land have been defeated'.<sup>45</sup> One of the Movement's leaders, Taniela Veitata, reported that these words 'stirred [members'] hearts'; 'The basis of the *Taukei* Movement', Veitata proclaimed, 'is that the chiefs are from God and the Fijians are to uphold the chiefly system' (quoted in *ibid.*:139-40).

Rabuka attended Taukei Movement meetings before launching his coup, and his interests appeared to be broadly aligned with those of the Movement. At the height of the coup he preferred to describe himself more as a fellow-traveller than as a member of the Movement. There is no question, though, that Rabuka believed in customary values; this belief is implicit in *No Other Way*. 'The chiefs are the wise men in Fijian society, guardians of our tradition', he said in July; 'take that power away and give it to the commoners and you are asking for trouble' (quoted in Lal 1988a:52).

One of the better accounts of Rabuka's ties to the eastern chiefly elite has been given by Scarr. Rabuka, Scarr says, identifies himself as a *bati*, a fighting man of his *turaga* or chief (who happens to be Ganilau). Customarily, says Scarr, 'the relationship between *turaga* and *bati* was symbiotic. The *bati* as defender of the borders was a very independent vassal. His support that gave the chief power could be withdrawn' (Scarr 1988a:131).<sup>46</sup> Rabuka considered his actions to be forcing the hand of the high chiefs; he was acting boldly whereas they had made only timid moves in public. He was, however, somewhat unsure of the level of their support, if not that of the wider chiefly community. Had the high chiefs opposed his coup, he may well have withdrawn and accepted failure. At one stage, when Rabuka considered the governor-general to be an intransigent opponent, he announced to a gathering of 700 troops: 'The penalty for treason is death and if this is to be my destiny, then I will accept it' (quoted in Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:78).

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Ganilau and Mara, however, to Rabuka's great relief, both came out in support of the broad thrust of his coup (see section 5, this paper).

Had they so wished, the ability of *all* chiefs to stop the coup could have been significant. They still commanded the loyalty of most village Fijians (Ganilau once asserted that there was nothing the chiefs could not ask of their villagers — Keith-Reid 1982:17). Strong condemnation from chiefs of Rabuka's actions would have left him with no power-base. But the defeat of the Bavadra government was in their interests. To get an exact measure of the thinking of the chiefly community before the coup is difficult, as its prominent collective body, the Great Council of Chiefs,<sup>47</sup> did not meet in April or early May. But immediately after the coup, the chiefs' strong feelings became clear. The Council met on 20 May and immediately endorsed the coup (Scarr 1988a:86), prompting Rabuka to call the Council his 'biggest fan club' (quoted in Lal 1988a:52). The chiefs 'saw the coup and a changed constitution as a last attempt to restore a false memory of Fijian unity and chiefly respect' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:131).

#### *Post-coup 'consensus' government*

In the years immediately following the coup, the Great Council of Chiefs acted as Fiji's surrogate parliament. The chiefs took particular advantage of the process of constitutional revision which Rabuka set in motion. The Council's early proposals were aimed at restoring 'consensus' government, under which Fijians would no longer vote directly for parliamentary candidates, but would exercise their influence at the village, district, and provincial levels. Tagupa has described the consensus system as

requiring prolonged discussions in a formal, face-to-face setting, punctuated with ceremony and protocol. The opinions of paramount personalities are accorded deference and great weight. Most important, personal accusations, a favourite device for politicians, are avoided altogether as a vulgar breach of protocol (Tagupa 1988:139).

Such a system would eliminate almost all possibilities for dissent within the Fijian community, exactly as the chiefs would wish.

The consensus system did not persist into the final version of Fiji's new constitution, promulgated by presidential decree on 25 July 1990.<sup>48</sup> The system finally enacted, however, as Don Dunstan<sup>49</sup> has described, 'provides a means by which Fiji would be ruled by an oligarchy of Fijian chiefs and their associates however the majority of citizens were to vote' (Dunstan 1990:9). The extent of this chiefly domination deserves close attention. Under the 1990 constitution the Great Council of Chiefs<sup>50</sup> chooses 24 of the 34 members of the Senate, and the president (who will



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thus almost certainly remain a high chief). The president, in turn, chooses nine senators,<sup>51</sup> and chooses the prime minister from the House of Representatives. On the prime minister's advice, the president appoints the various ministers, who can be drawn from the appointed upper house as well as the elected lower house. Thus, those occupying almost all of the key governing positions of Fiji are or can be appointed rather than elected.

The prime minister remains an elected representative, and must command the support of the majority in the lower house, but the electoral system virtually guarantees that this majority will be supportive of eastern chiefly rule. Naturally, the possibility of any significant sharing of power with Indians has been removed: they elect only 27 of the 70 seats. One seat has gone to Rotumans, and five have gone to those who do not qualify to vote as Fijians, Indians, or Rotumans.

But it is the method of electing the 37 Fijian seats which is most telling. Their domination by supporters of chiefly rule has been guaranteed in a number of ways. First, all seats in the House are now elected communally, so Fijian seats are elected by Fijians only; the Fijian seats won by Labour in 1987 were national seats, with voting on a common roll, and would not have been so won without Indian votes.<sup>52</sup> Secondly, only five Fijian seats (14 per cent) are allotted to urban areas, where a third of all Fijians live; urban Fijian voters had been critical to the Coalition's success. Thirdly, the 32 provincial seats are 'unevenly distributed, again heavily advantaging the supporters of the regime' (*ibid.*). For example, Lau with 14,000 Fijians has three seats, as does Ba (in the west) with 55,000; Rewa and Naitasiri with 98,000 Fijians have four seats, while Namosi has two seats for 4,000. Finally, all Fijian voters must be enrolled or establish their eligibility to be enrolled in the *Vola ni Kawa Bula*, the register of Fijians in their customary family units which establishes any rights to land. Many Fijians (particularly those living in towns or away from their home province) are not so enrolled, and would be discouraged from doing so by the complicated process involved. Thus they are and will likely remain ineligible to vote as Fijians (*ibid.*). They will be forced to vote on the 'others' roll, which in turn means that the five 'others' seats could well be held by Fijians.<sup>53</sup>

Not only Indians, but also the majority of Fijians, have been electorally discriminated against in the 1990 constitution. Furthermore, the constitution's protection of chiefly interests goes beyond the electoral system. Freedom of expression may be limited by laws

for the purpose of protecting the reputation, the dignity and esteem of institutions and values of the Fijian people, in particular the Bose Levu Vakaturaga [Great Council of Chiefs] and the traditional Fijian system and titles (Section 13[2][d]).

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Freedom of movement may be restricted 'in the interests of defence, public safety, public order, [or] public morality' (Section 15[3][b]). A major future role for the army is also guaranteed: the RFMF is to ensure 'the security, defence and well being of Fiji and its peoples' (Section 94[3]).

None of the operative parts of the constitution can be altered except by a two-thirds vote in both houses, including the votes of at least 18 of the 24 senators appointed by the Council of Chiefs. The 1990 constitution therefore guarantees that power in Fiji will remain with the chiefs and their supporters.

The chiefs could hardly have gained more by the coup. This, of course, is the reason why those who knew of it beforehand made no effort to prevent it, and why most supported it once it had happened. It also leaves open the strong possibility that some may have helped plan it. The chiefs' motive was fear: fear of losing their power to commoners and Indians; fear of modern class politics diminishing their relevance; fear of losing the respect and support of disenchanted commoners. The race, class, and custom explanations all help explain the motives behind the coup, but the chiefs and their staunch supporters were the critical element in ensuring its success. The coup's initial popularity with many Fijians was due largely to the efforts of this elite, who claimed that the only issues involved were the simplistic issues of race and land, and that the coup would benefit all Fijians. Neither claim was true — as more and more Fijians have come to realize in the years since.

Only one event confuses the post-coup picture of chiefly interest: Rabuka's second intervention. On 25 September 1987 Rabuka reasserted military control, announcing that Ganilau's interim government had strayed from the coup's objectives. At first, this seems to cast doubt upon the custom analysis; as Robertson and Tamanisau point out: 'despite his rhetoric of compliance to [sic] the chiefs, [Rabuka's] second coup overthrew the country's two highest chiefs, Ganilau and Mara' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:152). The champions of the racial explanation for the coup hold this up as further validation of their argument; Rabuka, they say, brought the interim government back into line with the goals of the Fijian race.

The second intervention was prompted by the Deuba Accords, an agreement reached between the Coalition and the Alliance for both to take part in a new caretaker government under Ganilau. During August and September, support for the Coalition had been growing, partly in response to Fiji's chaotic post-coup economy and a dramatically increased crime rate. The Coalition's 'Operation Sunrise' campaign received, in the (perhaps exaggerated) words of Robertson and Tamanisau, 'massive support' in Fijian villages. In mid-September a poll claimed a 'massive loss of Fijian support for the interim government' (*ibid.*:134-35). According to Robertson and Tamanisau, Mara and Ganilau, both 'old party stalwarts',

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read the writing on the wall. Their survival lay in collaborating with the Coalition, not in pursuing the Taukeist vision. . . . If [the Alliance] could ride on the wave of the Coalition revival, something might be salvaged (*ibid.*).

During meetings in Deuba (which were greeted with noisy demonstrations by the diminished Taukei Movement) the Alliance, the Coalition, and Ganilau forged a deal which promised to set Fiji on the road to respectability. Bavadra agreed to drop a challenge to the legality of Ganilau's dismissal of his government which had been before the courts. Ganilau claimed that the consensus deal had Rabuka's support; but the Accords 'shocked the Taukei Movement' (*ibid.*:138). The coup, Norton says, had created sufficient 'confusion about the locus of ethnic leadership' for Rabuka to yield to Taukei Movement anger and stage a second military intervention (1990:145). A convincing rationale for the intervention has been given by van Fossen:

[The Deuba Accords] appeared to give little or nothing to the minor [chiefs] and ethnic extremists who had risen to public prominence since the first coup and who favoured the recent recommendations of the Great Council of Chiefs which would carry Fiji into the second stage of ethnic relations. But more crucially [they] gave little assurance to Rabuka and his fellow officers who had led the first coup and who were fearful of their future if civilian rule returned (van Fossen 1987:30).

The second intervention, then, was carried out against the two highest chiefs (and the possibility of any future role by the Coalition) to guarantee the interests of the majority of chiefs and for Rabuka's own protection. The authors of *No Other Way* admit that Rabuka 'didn't trust the caretaker government as far as his own safety was concerned' (Dean and Ritova 1988:104). Rabuka thought that the Coalition and 'other prominent people in society, some chiefs in the mountains, and some who would like to be chiefs' had been 'influencing Ratu Sir Penaia and changing his direction' (quoted in *ibid.*:105). The east/west divide ('chiefs in the mountains' being from central Viti Levu, the area with the most egalitarian customary structure) was therefore another factor in the intervention.

Of all observers, it is Scarr who best argues that the second intervention did not contravene custom:

It took a very rigid view of custom to claim it would not envisage or accommodate the *bati* going against the *turaga*. *Bati* have actually overthrown *turaga* before now, sometimes thereupon discovering the mystical essence of power in themselves and taking over the state (Scarr 1988a:133).<sup>54</sup>

Neither did the two *turaga* remain resentful for long. Mara at first said he felt 'cast aside' and was 'going off to fish and play golf' (*ibid.*:130 — as shown in the next chapter, 'leaving others to it' was a favourite political tactic of Mara's). But at

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a meeting on 5 October with Rabuka, Bavadra, and Ganilau, Mara said that he found Rabuka's minimum demands 'acceptable' (Bain 1989:195). Two months later he became prime minister of the Republic. Ganilau appeared, at first, more intractable, saying 'They will have to drag me out, either dead or in irons' (quoted in Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:143). But by 5 December he, too, was happy to accept the presidency of the Republic. A letter leaked from within Fiji to *The Australian* also reveals that Ganilau had at least four days' warning of the Taukei Movement's plans for a second intervention (*The Australian* 26 September 1987).

The dismissal by Rabuka of the military/Taukei Movement government which had ruled Fiji from the second intervention to 5 December, and the subsequent reintroduction of the eastern chiefly elite, outraged some lesser chiefs and Movement members who wished to maintain their newly found power and increased status. But Rabuka had given notice of his intentions a month after the intervention:

I hope it will not be long before I can hand it back to these two high chiefs to run the country. It has always been the wish of the Fijian people that their country should be led by chiefs, and this is what we aim to do (Message from Rabuka to his home village of Drekeniwai, quoted in Dean and Ritova 1988:105).

The language of custom (or rather, the language of 'tradition') has been prominent in the propaganda of post-coup governments. The strengthening of the chiefly system has been trumpeted as the strengthening of all the 'traditions' Fijians hold dear. This has undoubtedly been of great importance in bestowing validity upon the post-coup regime in the eyes of village Fijians.

But while the government almost certainly believes in the ideal of 'tradition', the impact its economic policy is having upon the foundations of Fijian culture — that is, day-to-day social and economic concerns — is undermining that very ideal. The Republic of Fiji's Minister for Trade and Commerce, Berenado Vunibobo, has, says Robertson, 'made it clear that in its rush to achieve the status of the first newly industrialized country in the South Pacific, Fiji cannot "afford to bend to environmental concerns"' (Robertson 1990:123, quoting Vunibobo). The government's economic policy is one of replacing cane fields with factories. For a government which wishes to uphold 'tradition', the effect of this policy of intensive development is ironical, to say the least. It is hard to imagine anything more devastating to the Fijians' village-based way of life than a full-scale industrial revolution. Furthermore, a total disregard for Fiji's environment (hardly carefully protected as it is) can only have a detrimental effect upon that same land which is uppermost among Fijians' concerns.<sup>55</sup>

Talk by the coup-makers of 'tradition' appears, therefore, to be largely rhetoric. It is doubtful whether safeguarding 'traditional' political culture will also safeguard

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Fijians' everyday traditions. The rhetoric of tradition, however, like the rhetoric of race, has been critical to the success of the coup. It has shored up grass-roots support for the 'tradition' foremost in the coup-makers' minds: chiefly political dominance.

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## 5

### EXPLANATIONS INVOLVING SPECIFIC INTEREST

The motivations of specific organizations and individuals are the main subject of Lal's *Power and Prejudice* (1988a). Lal considers the coup to have been 'more about frustrated politicians bent upon recapturing power lost at the polls than ... about ethnic prejudice' (*ibid.*:7). His analysis treats each systemic factor as only one element among the many which make up an explanation for the coup. While this approach tends to undervalue some factors, it does allow valuable insights to be made into the motivations of key players.

This section deals with the 'specific interests' of four groupings of organizations and individuals: first, the United States and other external forces; secondly, Rabuka and the RFMF; thirdly, the governor-general; and fourthly, Mara.

#### The United States and other external forces

The promise by the Bavadra government to ban nuclear ship visits to Fiji, although merely a reversion to pre-1983 Fiji government policy, was considered by many observers to be a threat to US interests in the Pacific. This and some of the events surrounding the coup raised the possibility of CIA involvement in the coup's planning and execution.

Given the CIA's track record, it is no surprise that such suspicions should arise; as Ralph Premdas says, 'the behavior of the US in other parts of the Third World is powerfully suggestive' (Premdas 1989:109). These suspicions increased dramatically two days after the coup when the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported an 'unnamed Pentagon source' as saying 'we're kinda delighted.... All of a sudden our ships couldn't go into Fiji, and now all of a sudden they can' (quoted in Wilkes 1987:4). This anonymous quotation has probably done more to keep the 'CIA theory' alive than anything else.

The theory's primary champion has been Owen Wilkes, whose argument appears in an article published in various New Zealand newsletters.<sup>56</sup> The theory gained further exposure when a similar article by Joann Wypijewski was reprinted by the prominent magazine *Pacific Islands Monthly* (October 1987, pp.46-48; the article was first published in the New York-based *The Nation*) and when Wendy

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Bacon produced a report for SBS Television's 'Dateline' programme following Rabuka's second intervention (see Robie 1989:244-45).

Wilkes argues that 'the US since 1982 has been increasingly intervening in Fijian political, economic and trade union affairs', and notes 'a visit by America's foremost coup-maker [General Vernon Walters] and a stepping up of CIA activity immediately prior to the coup' (Wilkes 1987:4). His evidence for the former is the involvement in Fiji's affairs of various American-backed organizations, such as Business International, the Pacific Islands Development Program, and the Asian-American Free Labor Institute, all allegedly linked to the CIA. As for Vernon Walters, 'America's top expert on coups' (*ibid.*:7) Wilkes says:

There is no evidence he was actively involved in coup preparation. Presumably, however, he conveyed some sort of assurance to whoever was planning the coup that US assistance and support would be forthcoming (*ibid.*:8).

Joann Wypijewski, after covering similar ground to Wilkes, also notes deposed Deputy Speaker Noor Dean's conviction that 'the men who arrested him and his colleagues were not Fijian' (*Pacific Islands Monthly* October 1987, p.48). At least some were blacked up with shoe polish, all wore masks, and none spoke — the implication being that they were US soldiers, not Fijians. According to Wilkes, Edrick Sherman, the deputy chief of the US Embassy in Suva and 'probable head of the CIA team', was 'reportedly seen accompanying Rabuka on several occasions after the coup' (Wilkes 1987:9).

The chief adversary of this theory has been Michael Danby (1988), who argues that it is the result of a Soviet disinformation campaign. Danby follows the trail of key news stories from 'Moscow's principal front organization, the World Peace Council' (*ibid.*:43) to fringe publications and from there to the mainstream press. He dismisses allegations that 'the body movements' of the soldiers taking over Fiji's parliament were those of American blacks as 'racist drivel'; the argument that US mercenaries were involved, he says, is 'patronizing' towards Fijians, who are perfectly capable of 'organizing and executing their own rebellions' (*ibid.*:45).

Danby does convincingly refute some of the more outlandish claims of US involvement in the coup; a Soviet disinformation campaign, too, seems quite possible. But Danby's argument shares some of the weaknesses of the CIA theory itself. Wilkes points to organizations with 'alleged CIA links', while Danby points to 'front organisations' and typecasts Wilkes as a 'source of information for a whole network of hard-left activists, working to extend New Zealand's anti-US policy to the rest of the Pacific' (*ibid.*:46). In this sea of allegations there are few solid facts.

This has been reflected in discussions of the CIA theory by the major observers: few commit themselves to a position. After examining the evidence, Robertson and Tamanisau conclude on a note of doubt (1988:93, 108): 'Many questions remain

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unanswered. US reactions after the coup might simply represent opportunism'. They think it 'unlikely that the US was a prime mover' of the events of May.

Scarr is, not surprisingly, sceptical: 'The Royal Fiji Military Forces have never struck people who know them with the impression they would need CIA incitement or help...to carry out a coup' (Scarr 1988a:53). He says the visit of General Walters, 'that alleged harbinger of American coups', was 'long-planned'. And, in a swipe at Indian parliamentarians, he suggests that the soldiers carrying out the coups looked perfectly Fijian — to Fijians (*ibid.*:53-54).

Lal discounts the wilder allegations of US soldiers actually taking part in the coup (like Scarr, he notes that Rabuka was heard speaking in Fijian to his men). But he does not discount the overall possibility of US involvement:

Not all the evidence is in... The allegation that some [US] Embassy officials may have passed money and perhaps even material to members of the *Taukei Movement* is entirely within the realms of possibility. The real question is not whether the US was involved, but how deeply was it involved (Lal 1988a:36).

Robie, who draws heavily on Wilkes, notes the circumstantial nature of the evidence, but says 'there are too many coincidences for the possibility to be dismissed out of hand. Some involvement would not have been inconsistent with a CIA agenda' (Robie 1989:247).

But most who, on the one hand, say US involvement is a fair possibility, on the other hand admit that doubts will always exist. Events since the coup have given little firm evidence either way. Allegations in July 1987 of US plans for a military base in Fiji were quickly denied (Wypijewski 1987:46). Mara claimed soon after the coup that George Schulz had promised US aid for Fiji if Australia and New Zealand imposed trade embargoes (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:88), but the US was 'one of the few countries to suspend aid after the first coup' (van Fossen 1987:24),<sup>57</sup> and any promise made by Schultz has since been overshadowed by France's generous military aid to Rabuka (see, for example, Robie 1990:24-26).

That the US has not defended democracy in Fiji as vehemently as one might prefer is insufficient evidence for US involvement in the coup. The US's feting of Fiji's military (Wilkes 1987:6-7), and its wooing of Mara (who responded by revoking the pre-1983 ban on nuclear-ship visits without consulting his cabinet), is no more than one would expect of a country looking after its own interests. Wilkes has, since 1987, come to the conclusion that the coup was actually counter-productive to US interests (see Robie 1989:247); but just as this does not remove the possibility that the US helped plan the coup, neither does the probability that the US was 'kinda delighted' by the coup mean that it was involved.

The US is not the only external candidate which has been suggested as a likely instigator of the coup. Robie suggests that the influence of Australian and New

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Zealand businessmen such as Jeffrey Reid, the manager of Emperor Mines (which operates a large gold mine in Fiji), was 'probably even more crucial' than that of the US. Reid enjoys a close relationship with Mara and Ganilau, and, says Robie, the Fiji Labour Party's threat to nationalise the [Vatukoula] mine, later withdrawn, no doubt played a much larger role in the events of 14 May 1987 than did the stated intention to introduce a non-nuclear policy similar to that of New Zealand (*ibid.*:247-48).

Bavadra has relayed reports that Reid funded the Taukei Movement and spoke at public meetings in support of it (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:67), but the direct involvement of Reid in marshalling these forces and provoking the coup is as difficult to substantiate as that of the CIA. Reid's public support would, however, have helped increase the confidence of Fiji's anti-Coalition forces.

Premdas (1989:109), for one, says that the theory of external intervention, which 'brings together the role of certain multinationals, certain ex-ministers of the previous government, and the possible role of the US' and points to 'a coincidence of interests accidentally or conspiratorially converging', in his view 'best explains the coup'.<sup>58</sup> But the arguments in the theory's defence are characterized by scantily supported and often qualified allegations, and doubt exists on either side of the debate, to the point where it is given little credence today. Whatever the truth behind it, external intervention is therefore probably the least *useful* explanation for the coup. It also has the unfortunate effect of devaluing, in the minds of some foreign observers, the powerful internal explanations discussed hitherto.

### **Rabuka and the RFMF**

Rabuka, as the leader of the coup, is the most important of the many players in any coup explanation. He has always maintained that he acted alone in its planning. If this claim is accepted at face value, then an explanation for the coup need go no further than Rabuka's personal motives. Unfortunately, these motives were not as logical and obvious as one might prefer. They included a personal interpretation of race and custom, as has been noted in previous chapters; but private motives were also involved. These motives were nonetheless important, in that they strengthened Rabuka's determination to act as less single-minded people would not have acted. Tribal or ruling class conspiracies would have come to nought had a suitable agent not been at hand.

Robertson and Tamanisau suggest that Rabuka's views would have been well known in the appropriate 'small social and political circles'. As a result, 'only one person needed to approach him and suggest what they were seeking. He reportedly had his own axes to grind' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:107).



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What were these 'axes to grind'? Among other things, Rabuka feared that the Coalition would endanger Fiji's allegiance to the Queen (rather ironic, in view of his later declaration of a republic). Also revealed in his account of the coup is an obsession with the threat of Russian and Libyan expansionism in the Pacific: 'there was, in his assessment, a very real likelihood of India increasing its influence in Fiji — "and behind India stands Russia"' (quoted in Dean and Ritova 1988:48). This was despite the Coalition's pledge not to allow a Russian embassy to be opened in Fiji (see *Pacific Islands Monthly* May 1987, p.14). In fact, the biggest Russian story in Fiji's immediate past concerned actions of the Alliance: Mara 'rocked the region' in 1986 when he announced that Fiji might negotiate a fishing agreement with the USSR (*Pacific Islands Monthly* August 1986, pp.20-26). Rabuka's fear of Labour Party 'socialism' ignored the pragmatism and caution shown by the Bavadra government; he saw a modern social democratic party in terms of 1950s stereotypes.

Lal has given a further explanation for Rabuka's fear of a Coalition government. For some years, the Royal Fiji Military Forces had exercised a 'blatantly discriminatory admission policy' against Indians (Lal 1988a:55). A Coalition minister, shortly after the election, approached the RFMF to see what steps could be taken towards admitting more non-Fijians (*ibid.*:57); the government also announced a review of the army's role in the nation. Both moves would have disturbed Rabuka:

The army was close to Rabuka's heart, and the prospect of unacceptable reform in its operations and structure may have helped to convince him to act before it was too late (*ibid.*).

Rabuka's own briefing notes, handed to the soldiers who carried out the coup, suggest that Lal's conclusion is too equivocal. Rabuka makes very clear the importance he accords the RFMF:

**FOREIGN POLICY**

GG's position very difficult as he will be forced to accept policies which are against traditional interests but most importantly against the interests of the RFMF.

**DEFENCE POLICY**

They are likely to introduce measures to gain political control over RFMF e.g. intro of racial parity principle.... This we cannot and should never accept.

**MISSION**

To overthrow the govt and install a new regime that will ensure that the RFMF and national interests are protected.

('Opord 1/87' reproduced in Dean and Ritova 1988:21-22).

Rabuka's view of the importance of the military in developing nations springs, in part, from his experience of writing a thesis on that very subject. Dean and Ritova

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describe his year (1979) spent at the Indian Defence Services Staff College as 'one of the most influential in his career...deeply affecting, and directing, his political attitudes and opinions' (*ibid.*:28). Robie, however, has described the result of his ten months there as 'a dubious MSc "degree"' which is 'a frequent topic of bar jokes by his civilian and military colleagues' (Robie 1989:227-28). Rabuka had twice failed New Zealand's University Entrance examinations. His thesis was said to be 'heavily plagiarised from other writings on military coups' (*ibid.*:228).

By 1987, then, coups had long been on Rabuka's mind. Rabuka, says Lal, has acknowledged that he thought of a coup in 1977 when the Alliance was (temporarily, as it turned out) defeated by the NFP: 'By his own admission...the Colonel had plotted to overthrow a duly elected government by force of arms for quite some time' (Lal 1988a:9-10). By the time Bavadra's government was in place, his mind was made up: 'He decided on the military option the day the election results started to come out' (Som Prakash, review of *Rabuka—No Other Way* in Prasad 1988:102).

A concern for his personal future would also have been on Rabuka's mind. The commander of the RFMF, Brigadier Epeli Nailatikau, left the country four days before the coup, after stating that he was definitely going ahead with a court-martial for Rabuka. (Rabuka had disobeyed orders some years before by allowing a senior officer to return to Fiji from the Middle East for his father's funeral. See Scarr 1988a:66.) Rabuka, therefore, had to act while Nailatikau was away, if he was to act at all.

Rabuka's military obsessions and fears, coupled with his personal theories about race and tradition, are almost enough to make his *No Other Way* claims of 'going it alone' sound convincing. But even if those claims are accepted, Rabuka could not have staged his coup without his fellow soldiers' cooperation. Jim Sanday (1989)<sup>39</sup> and John Dalton (1990) have investigated the role of the RFMF, and have found that most of its predominantly Fijian members were supporters of the Alliance and the chiefs. This trend was noted in 1978 by sociologist Cema Bolabola:

To the Fijians a military career is a new symbol of power and a "weapon in favour of chiefs". Thus in the event of any threat to their status, support for the chiefly system from the army would be guaranteed (Bolabola (1978:158).

Coveted military positions had long served as 'a major source of Alliance Party patronage' (Howard 1990:11) and the 'conservative power elite became dominant within the officer corps' (Dalton 1990:5). Sanday says that the appointment in 1982 of 'a member from the ruling chiefly class to command the RFMF (Ratu Epeli Nailatikau)...reinforced the ascendancy of Fijian traditional values within the military' (Sanday 1989:12). Most members of the RFMF would not only have shared Rabuka's fears for its future, but also would have shared his fears about threats to chiefly dominance.

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The army's highest-ranking officers, Brigadier Nailatikau and Lieutenant-Colonel Sanday, were both committed to upholding due constitutional processes. But others were thoroughly 'socialised in the values of the conservative ruling elite' (*ibid.*).<sup>60</sup> Scarr (1988a:66-68) says that they saw the first- and second-in-command officers as 'out of touch' and preferred to follow the third-in-command, Rabuka. Rabuka would have had little difficulty in finding coup-makers and coup-supporters among his fellow soldiers.<sup>61</sup>

There is more to a successful coup, however, than the act. The motives of Rabuka and the army were a necessary cause of the events of the morning of 14 May, but were hardly sufficient to ensure the coup's success. That success was ensured by more powerful forces. This does not diminish the importance of Rabuka's personal motives, however, for Rabuka's motives made him a willing 'hired gun' (to use Lal's term) of the more powerful forces at work in Fiji (Lal 1988a:57).

### The governor-general

In the weeks following 14 May 1987, many pro-Coalition and pro-democracy forces inside and outside Fiji (including the governments of Australia, New Zealand, and Britain) placed their faith in the governor-general, whom they saw as offering the best chance for a return to pre-coup democracy or some broadly acceptable substitute. It has since been suggested that this faith was misplaced all along.

Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau's background did not support the picture of an unbiased mediator which governments and the press tried to paint of him after the coup. He was 'a former soldier, steeped in military tradition and a former [Alliance] Minister of Defense' (West 1987:224), and had also been deputy prime minister under Mara. Ganilau was not pleased by the Coalition's victory, as Scarr reports:

When the new prime minister was sworn in ..., it struck him the governor-general was not a happy man. Adi Kuini Bavadra, brought up for part of her childhood in Ratu Sir Penaia's own household, felt uncomfortable. The ritual tea-drinking was short on conversation (Scarr 1988a:39).

Ganilau's Alliance sympathies were compounded by his position as a prominent chief. He had long shared the fears of fellow chiefs that they were losing the support of the Fijian community. Lawson quotes one of his many pre-coup remarks on the subject:

[Ganilau] said a lot depended on the command and respect the chiefs had and received from their people. He said people must be educated and told to respect their chiefs. "This process must begin within the communities through teaching pre-school children the importance of traditional leaders and the respect they should have for them" (excerpt from a Fiji Department of Information press release, quoted by Lawson 1988a:16).

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In the period immediately before the coup, Ganilau had been appointed Tui Cakau-elect, paramount chief of the Cakaudrove confederacy (to which Rabuka belongs), an appointment which might not have been guaranteed had it not been for Taukei Movement support. Robie (1987:12) has suggested that this may have swayed him in favour of the Movement.

Ganilau, says Scarr, had been warned by the Movement of its plans to bring down the Coalition through a 'civilian coup' (Scarr 1988a:65) and Rabuka has said that he told Ganilau on 9 May that 'if he did not stage a political coup, I would stage a military coup' (quoted, *ibid.*:69). The governor-general passed none of this on to the prime minister. Bavadra had, like many, heard similar rumours, but had not believed them; a warning from such a notable as Ganilau would have demanded that precautionary measures be taken. Scarr is, however, forgiving of Ganilau's oversight: 'Ratu Sir Penaia does not always hear Sitiveni Rabuka very clearly' (*ibid.*).

Ganilau was certainly well-disposed towards Rabuka; he knew him well, having even been manager of Rabuka's rugby team (see Dean and Ritova 1988, photo insert). Significantly, in 1985 he intervened to have charges of court-martial against Rabuka dropped (Robie 1987:12), and in 1987 was trying to do so again, despite the fact that it was 'way outside his constitutional powers' (Scarr 1988a:66). Events at Government House on 14 May suggest, if not his inside knowledge, then an incredibly forgiving attitude towards Rabuka. Robie reports that:

When Colonel Rabuka arrived shortly after [the coup] at Government House his first words to Ratu Ganilau were: "Well, sir, I've done it!" (Robie 1987:12).

(Scarr [1988a:73] disputes this, saying that Rabuka instead 'referred to his having effected what the chiefs wanted'.) Lieutenant-Colonel Sanday had been called out to Government House by Ganilau and was there when Rabuka arrived (possibly, speculates Robie [1989:220], to get him out of the way). Scarr describes the following moments:

Soon afterwards, suspended, Sanday was seen to come out with tears in his eyes. The complete professional, he had waited for the commander-in-chief's order to use the weapons Ratu Sir Penaia had available but no order had come. Siti was the favourite (Scarr 1988a:74).

Ganilau's possible underlying support for Rabuka's actions conflicted, however, with his responsibilities as governor-general, about which Fiji's judiciary were anxious to remind him. At 2 p.m. on 14 May, the chief justice approached him with, as Lal puts it, 'inexplicably unsought legal advice that the purported suspension of the Fiji constitution was "illegal and invalid"' (Lal 1988a:74), and offered him the judges' 'undivided and complete loyalty'. Now more sure of his constitutional role, Ganilau issued a statement condemning the coup as 'unlawful' and announcing his assumption of executive authority (*ibid.*:81-82).

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This brought Ganilau under intense pressure from outside Fiji to stand firm. He received a message of encouragement from the Queen (which, as a committed monarchist, as are many Fijians, he would have found very persuasive), and foreign governments chose to recognize him as the legitimate authority during the crisis. Soon afterwards, however, Ganilau's actions began to fail the test of legality, both constitutionally and under the doctrine of necessity. This case is argued by Ghai and Cottrell in their legal work, *Heads of State in the Pacific* (Ghai and Cottrell 1990). Ganilau, they say, given his chiefly sway over Rabuka, could have 'tried harder to persuade Rabuka to return the military to the barracks' (*ibid.*:215). On 19 May Ganilau granted amnesty to Rabuka and his collaborators, dissolved parliament, and dismissed Bavadra's government. These actions were not only constitutionally illegal, they had 'no justification' under the doctrine of necessity. By these actions, Ganilau

made other solutions highly unlikely, ... [he] sidelined the Coalition leaders and weakened their legal and political position, ... [and] he went a long way to consolidate the coup, its leaders and objectives (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, Ganilau made no attempt to restore the 1970 constitution:

When the Governor-General talked of return to parliamentary government, he had in mind a new constitutional dispensation more in line with the thinking of Rabuka and his *taukei* associates (*ibid.*:216-17).

Ganilau initially encountered opposition from the Great Council of Chiefs for his perceptibly anti-coup stand. His difficulty, he told its 20 May meeting, was that, as Lal (1988a:87) reports, 'whatever his personal feelings...his oath of office required him to uphold the existing constitution'. After further lobbying from the Council, Ganilau assured its members that 'we are all aiming at the same result, generally, but that we are considering different methods of achieving this'. This assurance was followed by his announcement of a 'compromise' Council of Advisors dominated by Fijian Alliance members (many of whom were also Taukei Movement members). Rabuka delightedly noted that he 'personally endorsed 14 of the 18 members' (*ibid.*:88-89).

While there appears to be no solid evidence that Ganilau was involved in the coup's planning, his actions during May and June 1987 were clearly critical to its success. Rabuka's own biographers concede that 'the coup leader needed the governor-general's acquiescence, at the very least' (Dean and Ritova 1988:74). Perhaps his greatest value for Rabuka was that 'the cloak of the rule of the governor-general protected the regime from the full force of foreign as well as domestic opposition' (Ghai and Cottrell 1990:216).

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Ganilau's stand during Rabuka's second intervention notwithstanding,<sup>62</sup> he has demonstrated a broad support for the coup's aims, to the extent that he is now president of the Republic of Fiji. Perhaps the most pointed comment on Ganilau's post-coup actions was made by Bavadra's senior legal counsel, Dr John Cameron, in a July 1987 letter to *The Bulletin*: 'If this is neutrality, God help democracy and non-Fijians if he ever decides to take sides with the Fijians'.<sup>63</sup>

## Mara

Fiji's most prominent politician, and the person most often singled out as a possible instigator of the coup, is Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. Rabuka described Mara's support as his 'trump card'. When Mara joined his Council of Ministers the day after the coup, Rabuka says he 'nearly hit the roof as [he] jumped and cheered' (quoted in Dean and Ritova 1988:78).

Rabuka had good reason to do so. He had secured the support of unquestionably the most influential chief in the nation. Mara was not merely Fiji's longest-serving prime minister; to many people, say Robertson and Tamanisau, he was Fiji: 'Like many founders of modern nations, Mara... assumed an aura of long-held power and a sense of indispensability' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:105). One senior Fiji law officer opined that 'nobody in his right mind would organise a coup without knowing that Mara approved and was behind it' (*ibid.*:94).

Did Mara help organize the coup? As with Ganilau, there appears to be no solid evidence to that effect. But, as with Ganilau, it is likely that he knew what was afoot. Mara was at a conference at the Fijian Hotel, far from Suva and Parliament House, on the morning of 14 May. But he was far from out-of-touch, as Scarr observes:

If a report from deep within the Taukei Movement is true, Ratu Finau Mara [Mara's son and a member of the Movement] had been keeping his father informed and a message went down to the Fijian Hotel on 12 May to say the operation had been brought forward from Friday because the House was not to sit on 15 May (Scarr 1988a:75).

Mara has indirectly admitted previous knowledge of the coup, although not to that extent. In an interview with Robert Keith-Reid, Mara said he heard about the coup 'around 9 a.m.' on 14 May — an hour before it happened (Robie 1987:12).

As has been widely reported, Mara also played golf with Rabuka on 10 May. Two Samoan visitors playing with them concluded that 'from the conversation they had heard there was going to be a coup' (Scarr 1988a:67). These days, says Scarr, Rabuka's enigmatic response to this is 'I think it's the most widely publicised coup that took everybody by surprise' (quoted in *ibid.*).

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If, as seems likely, Mara knew what was imminent, his silence made him as much an accessory to the coup as if he had helped plan it. Mara's duty as a parliamentarian and a national statesman—not merely a Fijian one—was to uphold the 1970 Constitution and the duly elected government. Even if he had known only an hour beforehand, Mara should have alerted Bavadra to the danger. Bavadra would then have had at least some chance to put a stop to Rabuka's takeover.

David Lange believes that a word to the public from Mara before the coup 'would have arrested all this'.<sup>64</sup> Certainly, as was noted in previous chapters, Mara failed to publicly condemn the Taukei Movement's campaign of disruption. Had he done so, his words would have been given great weight by most Fijians. To many Lauans, at least, Mara is regarded as literally a demi-god. Mara's condemnation of the Movement would have brought into question its claims of enjoying 'wide Fijian support' (claims later adopted by Rabuka).

Mara's behaviour throughout this period confounded some of his admirers. Why, if he knew of the coup plans, did he let it happen? Why, if he did not, did he lend his support after the event by joining Rabuka's Council of Ministers the next day? Rabuka has reported that when Mara accepted his invitation to join, and Rabuka asked 'what about your reputation, sir?', Mara's reply was that 'his reputation was of no use if the nation was in ruins' (Dean and Ritova 1988:78). Scarr's opinion is that Mara's attitude was along the lines of 'what sort of mess will these bloody fools make of things without me?' (Scarr 1988a:75) and that Mara is, by nature, loathe to keep out of Fiji's politics for long.

More convincing reasons, however, have already been given. The custom factor provides many of the motives of Mara, the most influential high chief. For Robie, Mara was behind the coup by virtue of his position as head of Fiji's eastern chiefly elite. Robie also relays journalist Karen Mangnall's claims that

Mara had begun building up 'Fijian institutions, particularly the military', on the assumption they would be needed for a coup as far back as 1979 (Robie 1989:247).

Mara was, furthermore, the backbone of the Alliance, and in that role, his political future (as well as the party's) looked uncertain. Robertson and Tamanisau believe that after the elections, Mara lost the initiative within his own party, many members of which blamed him for the Alliance's loss. Therefore, they argue, 'it is probable that Mara believed that by assisting Rabuka he might regain the political initiative'. In so doing, he could return 'in his capacity as a Fijian chief' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:105).

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A further cause for concern may have been the Coalition's determination to uncover corruption. When the Coalition won power, it inherited a system of government saturated with friends of the Alliance, people receiving personal benefits from the Alliance, and people who felt they owed their livelihood to the Alliance. In its month of government, the Coalition shuffled around public servants and replaced others, and announced its intention to weed out corruption. After seventeen years of rule by one government it would inevitably have found it, and many in the Fiji bureaucracy and Alliance Party would have feared discovery.<sup>65</sup> Lawson is one who stresses the importance of this fear as a motivation of supporters of the coup. Robertson and Tamanisau, too, state that 'it is probable that corruption or the desire for access to state resources pushed many Alliance personnel into roles as active collaborators' (1988:108).

Had this Coalition push succeeded, it would have done more than embarrass a few public servants and party officials. The reputation of the former prime minister, having presided over a government seen to be corrupt, would have been severely damaged. It was suggested during the election campaign that Mara himself had skeletons in his closet:

In 1985 his family invested \$1.7 million loaned from the FNPF and the Bank of New Zealand into Marella [*sic*] House, an office complex rented to the Education Department (*ibid.*:95).<sup>66</sup>

The Education Department had been moved from quarters which, although imperfect, had room for expansion; those quarters remained unoccupied after the move. Scarr, in Mara's defence, notes that the move 'represented a saving of \$F31,284 on the rent of the department's existing offices', but admits 'there was room to see conflict of interest in this', although he then calls it a 'failure of judgement' (Scarr 1988a:46).

Scarr points out, furthermore, that anyone who 'supported the coup to avoid exposure...seemed likely to be disappointed because an army inquiry [into corruption] was in progress until, at any rate, the beginning of December 1987' (*ibid.*:47). This avoids the issue at hand. The army's future actions were unknown to corrupt onlookers at the time of the coup. Faced with the likelihood of exposure by the Coalition on the one hand, and possible escape from such exposure under the army on the other, many would have chosen to support the coup and hope for the latter.<sup>67</sup>

Scarr does not note Rabuka's early claim that corruption allegations directed towards Mara were an insult to a high chief and the chiefly system: 'To see my high chief being accused of corruption with no proof...the language used against him I



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will never accept' (quoted in Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:77). Doubtless Mara felt similarly insulted for similar reasons. Doubtless, too, he would rather not have faced such an inquiry, whether he was guilty or innocent.

The most interesting interpretation of Mara's actions (and inaction) is Lal's. He explains them not only in terms of Mara's Fijian role and his obvious political interest in seeing the Coalition overthrown, but as a repeat of his behaviour during previous times of crisis. In 1968, by-elections which established the NFP as 'the only true representative of the Indian people' promised to provoke racial conflict (Lal 1988a:41). Despite pleas from the public to calm the air, Mara chose to 'let things take their natural course for a while' (Mara, conversation with Frank Rennie, quoted in Lal 1988a:41). When the threat of conflict began to die down, Mara returned to the public arena 'with superb timing... stressing the vital importance to independent Fiji of multi-racial development' (*ibid.*).

In 1982, Mara claimed that his election opponents (an NFP-Western United Front coalition) had been provided with funds by the USSR. After sitting out the ensuing anti-coalition uproar, Mara 'returned to the centre stage, claimed the middle ground and "flew a kite" — his own words — about the need for a government of national unity' (*ibid.*:42).

Mara's refusal to condemn the Taukei Movement was, then, says Lal, a repeat of a tried-and-true tactic:

But 1987 was different. The problem did not resolve itself peacefully enough, as it had done in 1968, for Ratu Sir Kamiseva to make his accustomed triumphant return as a prophet of multi-racialism to rescue the situation in time (*ibid.*:44).

As for Mara's motives, Lal is in no doubt:

He leaned towards goals sought by Col. Rabuka. The 1970 Constitution did not *guarantee* Fijian paramountcy in perpetuity, as he thought it should have done and had been advised to that effect by constitutional experts (*ibid.*:81).

In conclusion, even if the possibility that Mara previously knew of the coup is disallowed, he (in that case rapidly) demonstrated his support for Rabuka's coup by joining his Council of Ministers. By doing so, for reasons related to customary and possibly personal interests, Mara dramatically increased Rabuka's chances of success, by providing his regime with legitimacy in the eyes of many Fijians, and by denying those international and domestic forces in favour of constitutional democracy that same advantage. The role of Mara in the coup and subsequent events was therefore a highly important one.

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## The value of the specific interest factor

The elements of the factor of specific interest are diverse, and some are of more value in a coup explanation than others; perhaps not surprisingly, external forces are less important than internal forces. The importance of the personal interests of Rabuka, Ganilau, and Mara stems from their critical role both in the events of the coup and in ensuring its success.

Although some of Rabuka's interests derived from other factors of explanation, the personal interests resulting from his military role had a strong influence on his actions (which were, naturally, 'critical to the coup's success!'). The interests of Mara and Ganilau, however, are largely derived from custom interests, and could therefore be explained by the custom factor. The question of corruption could possibly be addressed in terms of the class factor. Still, in both Mara's and Ganilau's cases, some of their *personal* traits (Ganilau's monarchist reluctance to abandon his constitutional position entirely, and Mara's tactic of 'leaving Fiji to it' and then stepping in to save the day) affected the course of the coup.

Specific interest, in the form I have adopted, is incapable of providing a complete explanation for the coup. But it does deal with aspects of the coup which cannot be easily explained in other contexts. Rather than contradicting the other factors of explanation, then, it complements them.

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## 6 CONCLUSIONS — TRADITION AS SMOKESCREEN

Many of my conclusions about the importance of race, class, custom, and specific interest as factors of explanation for the coup have already been made in the appropriate sections of this paper. In this section I give an overview of those conclusions, with a particular focus on the 'Politics of Tradition'.

Race has undoubtedly been the most commonly offered explanation for the coup; it so qualifies on the basis of countless news reports alone. Among academics, however, it has found less favour. Its primary academic champion, Scarr, in my view fails to make a convincing case. Scarr's acceptance of the 'myth of cultural homogeneity' leads him to presume that Rabuka had the support of all Fijians — an unspoken mandate which made his actions more a revolution than a coup. Such a

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presumption is not justified. Race does remain an important factor in the coup, however, and helped it to succeed: it was one motive behind the coup-makers' actions, and the rhetoric of race was of great importance in winning tacit support for the coup from those Fijians who were wary of Indians.

The class factor is promoted only by a minority among academics. It explains very well the rise of those forces overthrown by the coup, without which no coup would have occurred, and is therefore a necessary part of any coup explanation. It is insufficient, however, to adequately explain the motives of the coup-makers. Those motives were more than the protection of 'ruling class' wealth and privilege.

Explanations involving intervention by the CIA and other external forces are difficult to substantiate, and are supported by few academics. External intervention also fails the test of necessity: the coup may be perfectly adequately explained without it. In the absence of firm evidence, it will remain an explanation of negligible importance.

The personal motives of Rabuka, Ganilau, and Mara, and the group motives of the military and corrupt Alliance supporters, all played important roles in the coup. Most can be explained in terms of other factors: military interests, for example, were tied to those of the chiefs. Ganilau and Mara, however, were of particular importance: had they strongly opposed the coup, it may well have failed. Thus their specific interests (and of course Rabuka's) were the most necessary of any for ensuring the coup's success.

Custom was a necessary cause of the coup; the increasing political influence of commoner Fijians, and to a lesser degree that of the west, were of major concern to the coup-makers. More importantly, however, custom explains the coup-makers themselves. The forces behind the coup were the chiefs and their supporters, largely drawn from the east. The coup-makers, who naturally were an essential cause of the coup and its success, are themselves a product of custom. Therefore the importance of race, class, and specific interest, which lies in their role as motives of the coup-makers and coup supporters, is secondary to that of custom.

But is any one factor sufficient to explain the coup? The answer is no: all played an important role. Only external intervention and corruption would probably not have been necessary for the success of the coup; and of these, the latter probably did play a part, while the former may have done. As for race, it is possible to speculate that in a Fiji without Indians, a class challenge to customary forces could well have been sufficient to provoke a coup; but in Fiji as it actually exists, race was undoubtedly an important element, if not in causing the coup, then at least in ensuring its success.

The difficulty lies in determining the relative significance of these factors. My own determination is that, while almost all are necessary elements in an explanation

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of the coup, custom provides the best framework within which to incorporate those elements. Also, even though the other factors were important, custom is the factor most nearly sufficient in itself to explain the coups.

### **The growing role of 'tradition' in Pacific politics**

Fiji is only one of several countries in the Pacific which have seen an increase in the political role played by custom in the recent past. This regional trend seems to imply a growing dissatisfaction with mere political independence from former colonial rulers, and a search for a more profound independence: an independence, as far as is practicable, from 'Western culture'.

A century of colonial rule caused or accelerated the demise of many of the practices and beliefs of the Pacific's indigenous peoples. In their place, local variants of well-established European practices arose, being either imposed by colonial powers or adopted by local inhabitants. Now, in an attempt in part to build a truly independent identity, some in the Pacific are attempting to recapture their pre-colonial practices. While it is now impossible to bring those practices back in their entirety — some have been forgotten, some are no longer wanted — it is possible, they believe, to adapt existing 'Westernized' practices so that they more strongly reflect 'indigenous traditions'.

These developments have affected many different aspects of society in the countries of the Pacific. Some of those aspects, such as local art and craft, have never been totally 'Westernized' (although it is doubtful that any have been completely immune to changes brought on by colonization and modernization). In such cases the process of 'recapturing indigenous traditions' is more one of revival than of adaptation or reinvention.

One aspect of society, however, has been 'Westernized' in practically every country of the region. This aspect, furthermore, affects all others and determines the way these societies will develop. That aspect is politics. The entire framework of politics in each Pacific country — with bodies of elected representatives, governments drawn from those representatives, and written constitutions specifying how these processes will work — is based on a Western model (usually the Westminster model, but in some cases a presidential model). This is not to say that Pacific politics is in some sense a carbon copy of Western politics, with every country's parliament a duplicate of its colonial ruler's, and every election campaign a mimicking of an Australian or British campaign. On the contrary, some aspects of Pacific politics and political systems are unique.<sup>68</sup> The complicated, racially based electoral system described in Fiji's 1970 constitution was like no other. Such examples, however distinctive they may be, can hardly be said to reflect 'indigenous traditions'.

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In an attempt, then, to make this dominant aspect of society more closely conform to 'tradition', thereby clearly establishing an 'indigenous' identity for their respective countries, elements throughout the Pacific are working to incorporate more 'tradition' into their political systems. Post-coup Fiji provides the most prominent examples of this process, and raises some disturbing questions.

The role of 'tradition' in Fiji is already a major political issue, and will continue to be one throughout the 1990s. But what is meant by 'tradition' in the context of Fiji's politics? 'Tradition' is not a term easily defined; its meanings and connotations are varied, and they sometimes conflict. A generally accepted everyday definition is that a 'tradition' is a belief or practice which has been handed down from generation to generation. This implies to most people that traditions have remained unchanged for as long as can be remembered. In the Pacific context, to speak of something as a 'tradition' further implies that it derives from pre-colonial (or pre-European contact) beliefs or practices. The umbrella terms 'tradition' and 'traditional' collect these individual traditions into a single whole, a unique 'belief-system' or 'way of doing things' which has the weight of history and experience behind it.

For some years historians and anthropologists have questioned this simplistic view of tradition. A considerable body of literature has emerged in the last decade on the subject of the 'invention of tradition', some of it focussing on the Pacific experience.<sup>49</sup> Central to all of this work is the observation that many 'traditions' (and hence much of 'tradition') in any one society had their beginnings not in the mists of long-forgotten eras but rather during recent history. Many examples have been given of 'traditions' which originated in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. According to the generally accepted definition given above, then, such 'traditions' would seem not to be traditions at all.

The 'invention of tradition' argument seems at first to reduce the value of the label of 'tradition'. How, it may be asked, can any practice be traditional, in the sense that it is linked to the distant past, if it can be shown to have been invented or significantly changed at some stage in the last 100 or 200 years? Furthermore, why is it important to some in the Pacific that invented elements of systems of government and other aspects of the political process be seen as genuinely 'traditional'?

The latter question is a key one in any discussion of 'tradition in Pacific politics', one only beginning to be considered by political scientists and others. For most people (in the Pacific as elsewhere) the issue of 'invented traditions' is unfamiliar, if not unknown. Questions about the 'inauthenticity' of traditions do not occur to those who are not aware that their 'traditions' may be invented. Most people believe the generally accepted definition given above: that is, that anything labelled a 'tradition' is longstanding and not of recent origin.

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The label 'traditional' can actually afford new practices a large measure of protection from subsequent questioning and attack. A new generation, not having known a time when a certain practice did not exist, and having been told only that that practice is 'traditional', may treat that practice as if it *were* traditional — that is, a genuinely time-honoured practice — even if it was invented only a generation before. So labelled, the invented practice acquires an exalted status not enjoyed by its competitors; it has an advantage against any suggested replacement, in that it is now the 'tried and true' alternative.

There is, I would suggest, commonsense in favouring the 'tried and true'; there is commonsense in following a thoroughly tested path which has been found adequate by previous generations, in the same way as employers prefer job applicants with relevant work-experience to applicants without. This 'commonsense' explanation may also explain the certain degree of comfort that many people gain from traditions — that is, from continuing to do things as they have been done for many generations. In the Pacific, a similar explanation may also apply to the emphasis given to the *indigenous* nature of local traditions; traditions are seen to come from pre-colonial ancestors rather than from colonial outsiders, and hence are seen as being more in harmony with the local people, having been developed under and for local conditions.

The concept of the 'invention of tradition', although gaining prominence upon the release in 1983 of Hobsbawm's and Ranger's collection of the same name, has been discussed by Pacific scholars for some time — in particular those concerned with Fiji. Peter France's pioneering work *The Charter of the Land* (1969) focussed attention on the invented character of many 'traditional' institutions in Fiji. Fiji is in fact a key example, often discussed in this context: here was a colony with a prominent nineteenth-century governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, who actually wished to preserve Fijian traditions and Fijian ownership of land. In 1876, Gordon convened the first 'Great Council of Chiefs' to ascertain customary land rights, inventing a prominent Fijian political tradition in the process: no such body had existed in the divided and war-torn country beforehand. The chiefs so brought together actually disagreed about the nature of customary rights; this confusion was only resolved when Gordon threatened that, unless a decision were made, Fijians' land would be given to Europeans. The chiefs suddenly reached agreement, and so from an invented Council of Chiefs acting under duress came the invented tradition of the *mataqali* as the land-owning unit (Rutz 1987:537-38).

Fijian 'tradition' was also subject to what Martha Kaplan has termed 'the invention of disorder' (Kaplan 1989:359). Some genuinely indigenous practices were actively suppressed by the Fijians' new colonial masters. Fijian practices and institutions 'had to show social utility in relation to colonial goals and purposes' to qualify as 'traditional' in British eyes; those that did not were categorized as

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superstitious, heathen, or criminal. In the extraordinary example of *luve ni wai* rituals (not understood by the British, and therefore seen as subversive) these newly proclaimed 'disorderly' practices were also claimed to be unacceptable to Fijians themselves (*ibid.*:352). The suppression of *luve ni wai* was therefore not merely the suppression of a tradition, but the invention of a negative tradition.

Not all invented tradition has been the result of colonial dictates. Roger Keesing, in his important article 'Creating the past: custom and identity in the contemporary Pacific' (Keesing 1989), has criticized aspects of the reinvention of tradition by Pacific peoples themselves. In 'what purports to be [the] study and revival of cultural traditions', says Keesing, Pacific peoples, particularly Fourth World minorities, 'idealize and mythicize the cultural past as a Golden Age' and 'edit out human sacrifice, chiefly oppression, bloody wars [and] patriarchy' (Keesing 1991:169). This process of idealizing and editing, says Keesing, is prompted by *Western* values of right and wrong, and draws on 'Western-derived countercultural critiques'. Keesing's criticism of this process of ideology-construction — perhaps his main one — is that 'such ideologies become self-delusory if they are not interspersed with visions of "real" pasts that cast into relief not simply their idealized virtues, but their cracks of contradictions' (Keesing 1989:36).

Lately, some anthropologists have attacked the notion that invented traditions are somehow 'false' or 'inauthentic'; in this context Keesing's remarks about 'spurious pasts and false histories' have been criticized (see Linnekin 1991:175). In the words of Nicholas Thomas (1992:), 'assumptions have clearly become more sophisticated...it is now emphasized that created identities are not somehow contrived and insincere'. Some anthropologists are attempting to exorcize what Margaret Jolly has termed 'the spectre of inauthenticity' (Jolly 1992). In part this stems from anthropologists' recognition of their discipline's limits: the 'real' pasts of Pacific peoples can only ever be imperfectly uncovered. 'Invented' tradition is therefore being seen as a focus of anthropological study as important as 'real' tradition, and change in tradition is being accepted as an inevitable (and desirable?) aspect of Pacific life.

While this new strand to the literature is to be welcomed, and its arguments appear valid in the more general context of Pacific societies and cultures, it has the potential to set back the study of the growing role of tradition in Pacific politics. In effect it limits criticism which might be made of present-day 'traditional' political institutions, disallowing any criticism that is based on the 'inauthentic' nature of the traditions underpinning those institutions. In so doing it undermines any examination of those institutions' political legitimacy, legitimacy which may derive to a significant degree from their 'traditional' nature.

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The implication of the 'exorcism of the spectre of inauthenticity' argument in the Fiji coup debate is that the invented nature of Fijian traditions is not legitimate ground for criticism of today's 'traditional' politics. In the political context, however, I believe that the task of exposing inauthenticity remains a valuable one. In political systems, problems arise when invented 'traditional' political institutions — such as the Great Council of Chiefs, or the pre-eminence of Eastern chiefs over all Fiji — are portrayed as authentic, because *they gain a large measure of their legitimacy from that false authenticity*. As previously noted, this false authenticity can actually afford such institutions much protection from attack, particularly in a community, such as the indigenous Fijian community, which values tradition highly. In effect, these inauthentic traditions are conferred an unfair advantage over alternative arrangements, and 'traditional' figures, such as chiefs, gain a similarly unfair advantage over their commoner rivals.

Those standing to benefit politically from 'inauthentic' traditional political institutions (mainly chiefs) may be as unaware of that inauthenticity as are most other members of their society. But this should not imply that, as there is no *intent* to deceive, the hunt for inauthenticity should be called off. If the basis of chiefly political legitimacy is questionable, this should be made known, for there is much at stake: political institutions have the potential to affect every aspect of people's lives, and not necessarily for the better, as many aspects of post-coup life in Fiji have shown.

Discussions of 'invented traditions' in politics can encounter a cool reception from some quarters. In some cases — and Fiji is probably one — customary rulers will not *wish* to know about the inauthenticity of their institutions, and an intent to deceive may then emerge. In such cases the task of exposing inauthenticity is an even more valuable one. But why, in such cases, do we see an attempt to portray 'invented traditions' as 'authentically traditional' in the first place, when in other aspects of society and cultural life invented traditions may be perfectly acceptable and even inevitable?

One explanation may be that to accept that a 'traditional' political institution is invented is to accept *change*, the very antithesis of 'authentic' tradition. If a traditional institution is shown to have been invented, it loses some of its 'tried and true' reputation, and demonstrates to 'tradition'-minded locals that 'traditional' political institutions are not necessarily rooted in the distant past, and *need not be*. Customary leaders whose forebears may have sanctioned radical change (as occurred in Fiji) can hardly then argue that a similar degree of change today would violate 'tradition'. In Fiji, such a set of circumstances would have left traditionalists with little defence against (for example) Labour Party proposals to make the distribution of rents from Fijian-owned lands more equitable.



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The question then to be asked is, 'who controls the process of making political institutions more traditional?' Moves towards an expansion of the role played by tradition in Pacific systems of government have not always proved to be in the interests of those they are claimed to benefit — that is, the bulk of an indigenous population. An expansion of the role of 'tradition' in Fiji has meant the strengthening of a customary elite. Furthermore, under the guise of 'tradition', basic concepts and rights adopted during or after colonial rule, such as freedom of expression or equal representation, have been replaced with restrictive rules which conflict with Western values. These rules have served to reinforce hierarchy and restrict opportunities for voicing dissent in a manner which has directly benefitted the customary elite.

Rhetorical references to 'tradition', the term carrying with it a wide range of deep implications for any Pacific audience, serve well the current regime. 'Tradition', when promoted as an expression of indigenous values and independence, serves as a smokescreen to disguise moves by Fiji's customary elite towards entrenching itself in power. Nobody really knows what level of Fijian support the post-coup regime commands. Even if, however, it has the support of a majority of Fijians, it is doubtful that that majority is fully aware of the implications of the regime's policies for the rights and values it has come to expect. The smokescreen of tradition has clouded over such questions. The legitimacy of the post-coup regime as being representative of the Fijian people is therefore questionable.

The military-backed government seems to have shared doubts about its level of Fijian support, which Lal suggests is why it refused to put the constitution to a referendum and why an election was not held for some years; the government wanted no visible demonstration of any lack of support among those Fijians whose interests it was supposedly defending ('Dateline', SBS Television, 10 November 1990).

But even if Fijians were united in their support for chiefly rule, another question remains: why should the Indian half of the population be expected to subject itself to another culture's idea of a 'traditional political system'? It may be acceptable for culturally homogeneous nations such as Tonga to adopt electoral systems biased toward customary groups.<sup>70</sup> Fiji, however, is no longer culturally homogeneous.

When studying the political events of Fiji, which to date have been dominated by British colonialists and Fijian chiefs, it is easy to overlook the Indians, and even, as do Rabuka and some others, to dismiss them as 'immigrants' who shouldn't expect to wield real power. But these Indians are nowadays all native to Fiji. The past generations chose Fiji over India,<sup>71</sup> but the newer generations have known no other country than Fiji. Most could not afford to leave, and most would not want to leave. That they choose to stay in Fiji, however, does not mean that Indians should accept

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an infringement of their basic rights; each Indian has as much of a right to participate in the determination of the country's political system as does each Fijian.

A political system which can only satisfy Fijians is therefore unsatisfactory. Some form of compromise is needed. The 1970 constitution's form of democracy, with racial voting, over-representation of Europeans, and a Fijian-dominated upper house, was one such compromise.

The disappointment caused by the coup, both locally and internationally, was therefore well founded. The compromise so essential for Fiji had already been found. It was that very compromise which was overturned and replaced with a system satisfactory only to an unknown fraction of one element of Fiji's racial mix.

Richard Mulgan, in an article entitled 'Should indigenous peoples have special rights?', reaches a more general set of conclusions, but they apply here:

Of course, the position of the descendants of precolonial peoples can be improved on. . . . But this should not be done in the name of special political rights for indigenous peoples as such. . . . Some compensation for past wrongs may be necessary and desirable, but it is the present and future that count, and the guiding principles for the present and future must be justice and equality for all citizens (Mulgan 1989:388).

To argue for a compromise political system is not to deny that the Fijian people could be better represented in Fiji's economy, nor that it is important to maintain Fijian culture. Given that Fijians' culture is unique, while Fiji Indians' culture is a modified form of that existing in India, there is, arguably, a greater need to bolster the former against subsumption. But unquestioned and unchecked rule by a chiefly oligarchy was not a part of post-independence Fijian culture, despite the persistence of chiefly interests below the political surface. As Tupeni Baba has said, 'the current constitution takes the Fijian people backwards more than a hundred years' (speaking on 'Dateline: power play in paradise', SBS Television, 10 November 1990).

The ordinary people of Fiji, of all races, believed by 1987 that democracy was well established in Fiji. Lawson has argued that this was always a false assumption, and events seem to support her argument. But that this belief was widespread surely indicates that the potential existed for democracy to become well established — at least to the point where a coup could not have overthrown it so completely in a matter of weeks or days. As Robie says:

Christianity was introduced to Fiji only 150 years ago; now it is a deeply embedded part of Fijian culture. Can it seriously be suggested that democracy cannot be a part of it as well? (Robie 1989:286)

Unfortunately, the forces for democracy in Fiji now face a difficult task. Possibly their most profound setback came in November 1989 when Timoci Bavadra lost his fight with cancer; estimates of the number attending his funeral at

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Viseisei ranged from 20,000 to 50,000 (*Islands Business*, December 1989). The provisions of the 1990 constitution have made any outright election win by Labour and/or the NFP impossible. Fiji's opposition forces have splintered, and their chances of gaining any political power of real significance seem slim.

Fiji's foreseeable future will therefore be dominated by the chiefs and the military. The continuing role of the latter in Fiji's politics seems assured. The RFMF's numbers have swelled from 2,000 in 1987 to 5,000 today, and its budget allocation for the 1990/91 financial year was F\$38 million (compared to a health care allocation of F\$29 million). Furthermore, the military, as Sanday notes, has become increasingly politicized since the coup: the level of officer-training in non-military skills (such as law and political science) has increased, for example, and four former Alliance MPs have been granted commissioned rank (Sanday 1989:15).

Rabuka, of course, remains prominent in post-coup politics. After two years of pressure from Mara to choose between the army and politics, Rabuka finally responded by opting for the latter. He left the army in August 1991, and became minister for Home Affairs and co-deputy prime minister (see *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 1991); at the time of going to press he has, through some clever factional manouvring, emerged victorious from the first elections held under the 1990 constitution as Fiji's new prime minister. He had already declared his desire to be prime minister in August 1990, at that time saying his goal was to

fulfil my objectives and my promises of 1987. My objective was the firming up of the Fijians as the true owners of this country.... My promise was to look after the guests, the non-Fijians (*Pacific Islands Monthly*, August 1990:11).

The 'firming up' of the 'true owners' — the chiefs — has already been achieved. With the 'guests' now defeated, thereby removing a source of concern shared by many Fijians, divisions within the Fijian community will be exacerbated. Conflict between commoners and chiefs, however, will probably not become obvious to the public, given the biases of the electoral system, and given that laws are made possible by the 1990 constitution which prohibit any attacks on the 'reputation, the dignity and the esteem' of the chiefs.

More obvious will be a resurgence of tribal rivalries, as the three confederacies (and a possible fourth) vie for power and influence. Robie has described one case of tribal rivalry which has already occurred:

On 22 January 1988, three spear and club-wielding Taukeists raided the Suva offices of Radio Fiji in an abortive coup attempt which failed to gain the support which had been expected....The crude plot...involved a scheme to kidnap President Ganilau and replace him with...Ratu Sir George Cakobau (Robie 1989:248).

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The plot was an attempt to 'restore the social order represented by...the head of the Kubuna', Cakobau (ibid.:285). Cakobau's potential as a 'rallying point for widespread opposition to the Tovata ascendancy' was also noted by Norton:

Ratu George, supported by several other Tailevu chiefs, voiced his displeasure with the regime of Mara, Ganilau, and Rabuka (all of Tovata) by boycotting a meeting of the Council of Chiefs (Norton 1990:148).

Cakobau's death in November 1989 has, for the present, lessened any threat to the Tovata chiefs, but challenges from other areas are likely to arise now that the only arena in which significant political change may be achieved is the chiefly system.

Custom not only provides the best framework for explaining the coup; it also provides the model for Fiji's politics in the 1990s and beyond. Fiji's political system will thus make a fascinating subject for study by political scientists, and the literature of the coup will undoubtedly be joined by a large body of literature dealing with Fiji's politics after the coup. Unfortunately, for the majority of Fiji's people, Fijians and Indians alike, subservience to an oligarchy of chiefs may prove less a source of fascination than a source of frustration.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Members of the army were (and are) predominantly indigenous Fijians. Less than 3 per cent of the RFMF were Indians at the time of the coup (West 1988: 223).

<sup>2</sup> *Ratu* is the Fijian chiefly title for men of rank; its equivalent for women is *Adi*.

<sup>3</sup> A particular observer's explanation will not necessarily fall solely under one factor heading. The predominance of a particular factor within an explanation may determine under which heading it best belongs; but where necessary I have discussed different aspects of an explanation under different factor headings.

<sup>4</sup> *Taukei* is the term for a member of a village land-owning clan, but in pre-coup usage had come to mean 'indigenous Fijian'. Since the coup it has gained various political connotations as a result of its use by the Taukei Movement.

<sup>5</sup> Further discussion about the nature of pre-coup 'democracy' in Fiji, and some of its failings, can be found in Lawson (1988b:35-47). (Lawson in no way endorses the idea that Fiji democracy's failings somehow justified its overthrow.)

<sup>6</sup> Notable exceptions were David Robie, a freelance journalist in the Pacific, and Marian Wilkinson, of the ABC's 'Four Corners' programme.

<sup>7</sup> A likely interpretation of this apparent paradox is that Rabuka was concerned about the damaging consequences of this unrest not for the Coalition, but only for anti-Coalition Fijians. In this case, he would have seen himself as enacting the Taukei Movement's wishes, but in a more efficient manner.

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This rationale would be consistent with such statements as 'I see how these events could lead to serious situations and threaten law and order and property' (Rabuka, quoted in Robie 1989: 221).

<sup>8</sup> Dean is an Australian journalist and Ritova a Fijian photo-journalist.

<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Lawson lectures in Politics at the University of New England. In this paper I have referred to her many articles and papers on the subject, which are noted individually. Her book on the coup, *The Failure of Democratic Politics in Fiji*, has since been published (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Robert Robertson is an historian at the University of the South Pacific, and Fijian Akosita Tamarisau is a journalist who worked for the *Fiji Sun* before the coup.

<sup>11</sup> First, 'tradition' embraces more aspects of a society's culture than its politics, and secondly, 'traditional', in the context of the Pacific, is often taken (rightly or wrongly) to mean 'pre-European contact'. The labels 'custom' and 'customary' carry fewer such connotations, and allow for the evolution of 'traditional' structures through the colonial and post-colonial periods. Compare, for example, these definitions drawn from *The Macquarie Dictionary* (1981):

tradition, *n.* 1. the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, etc., from generation to generation, esp. by word of mouth or by practice.

custom, *n.* 3. a long-continued habit which is so established that it has the force of law. 4. such habits collectively.

customary, *adj.* 2. of or established by custom rather than law. 3. *Law.* defined by long-continued practices.

It must be acknowledged that the distinction between these terms is a fine one (and where others have used the term 'traditional' I have not taken issue with them). The quasi-legal dimension to the term 'custom', however, makes it useful in a political discussion. I also wish to avoid the 'pre-contact' connotations of 'traditional' as far as is possible. Fijians themselves, few of whom have a detailed knowledge of Fiji's pre-colonial history (which regrettably is not taught in most schools), are apt to consider the village practices with which they have grown up as being 'traditional', even though these practices may in fact have developed within the last one or two generations.

<sup>12</sup> Senior lecturer in Anthropology and Comparative Sociology in the School of Behavioural Science at Macquarie University.

<sup>13</sup> Primarily, these are Eddie Dean and Stan Ritova, Brij Lal, Stephanie Lawson, Robert Norton, Robert Robertson and Akosita Tamarisau, David Robie, and Deryck Scarr. But also discussed to some extent are the views of Kenneth Bain, Michael Danby, Don Dunstan, Christopher Harder, Ralph Prendas, Theo Roy, William Tagupa, Nicholas Thomas, Anthony van Fossen, and Owen Wilkes.

<sup>14</sup> Fiji's economy has largely recovered (thanks to tax-free zones which act as incentives for overseas investors), although it is doubtful whether ordinary Fiji citizens are seeing the benefits of this recovery. The Fiji dollar has been devalued more than 30 per cent since the coup, and market prices have inflated by over 30 per cent in the same period. 'The government's economic revival', says reporter Ron Harel, 'is a mirage. Most profits are going offshore' (Ron Harel, 'Dateline: Power Play in Paradise', SBS Television, 10 November 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Percentages from North (1987:22). Total from 'Muslims in Crossfire', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, September 1987, p.24. These commonly quoted figures are not census results; rather, they were drawn from an interim population survey conducted in 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Specifically, by Rabuka himself. See Dean and Ritova (1988:126).

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<sup>17</sup> When the value of this land is examined, however, a different picture emerges. Less than 10 per cent of Fijians' land is cultivable, and most of the highest-value prime commercial freehold land is owned by Europeans (Premdas 1990:12).

<sup>18</sup> Lal (1988a:49) notes that by 1986 38.9 per cent of Fijians lived in urban areas.

<sup>19</sup> The explanations he notes are intervention by the CIA, the manipulation of Rabuka by powerful individuals, and a 'boundless ambition' on Rabuka's part.

<sup>20</sup> It is ironical that one of those leaders, Apisai Tora, had, until 1982 when he joined the Alliance, been a member of parliament for the predominantly Indian National Federation Party (*Pacific Islands Monthly* November 1987, p.15. See also Norton 1977:129).

<sup>21</sup> The '6 per cent of total voting strength' point stressed by Scarr overlooks this. Scarr implies that the 30 per cent of Fijians who failed to vote would, if they had voted, have voted for the Alliance in similar proportions to those who turned out. This cannot be asserted with certainty given their decision to abstain from voting.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Bain has served as an administrator in colonial Fiji, and as a director at the Commonwealth Secretariat. His book, *Treason at Ten* (1989) is a personalized account of the coup.

<sup>23</sup> Under the 1970 constitution, there were 52 seats in the (lower) House of Representatives. Twenty-seven were communal, filled by candidates of the appropriate race who were elected by voters of the same race. Of these seats, 12 were Fijian, 12 Indian, and 3 General (i.e. other races). The remaining 25 seats were 'national'. Of these, 10 were Fijian, 10 Indian, and 5 General, and they were filled by candidates of those races. Voting for national seats, however, was based on a common roll. Therefore, if the Indian vote for a national seat was outnumbered by the Fijian vote (with General electors usually voting with Fijians), the candidate (of whatever race) favoured by Fijians would win. (The Alliance won many national seats this way; its Indian national MHRs were often elected by Fijian votes.) Under a first-past-the-post system, though, a split in one community's vote had a similar effect. Thus, a split in the Fijian vote led to the NFP election win in 1977 and the Coalition win in 1987 (although a precise explanation is somewhat more complicated). (This note on Fiji's electoral system is based on North 1987:22.)

<sup>24</sup> The government could have gradually changed the composition of the Supreme Court in its favour, but would have done so at the risk of encountering considerable public hostility.

<sup>25</sup> It should not automatically be assumed that because Kahan is an Indian, his sympathies lie with the Coalition. His first name, Mohammed, indicates that he is a Muslim. Fiji's Muslim community has not distanced itself from Rabuka's regime as completely as other Indians have. The Fiji Muslim League took advantage of the post-coup constitutional review process to lobby for separate representation for Muslims, a long-sought goal (although not achieved in this instance).

<sup>26</sup> Harder was one of several lawyers who helped prevent Kahan's extradition from London to Fiji. His book, *The Guns of Lautoka* (1988) is partly an autobiography and partly a description of his personal experiences in post-coup Fiji.

<sup>27</sup> These allegations are mainly drawn from Kahan's own written account, which is reproduced in full in Harder (1988:214-17). A summary of this account (with *sics* omitted for the sake of brevity) follows:

Mara's initial deal with Colonel Rabuka was that Rabuka hand back power within 30 days from the bloodless coup to Mara. ... [But Rabuka] started to enjoy the fame and feel of real power. ... He demanded active participation in any new government ... Rabuka's nagging fear was that ... he could be dispensed of if he gave up real power....

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The question that worried Mara was that the longer Colonel Rabuka stays in effective control of power and learns from Mara, Ratu Mara will become dispensable. And it would be harder for Mara to get rid of Rabuka.... We heard that Mara was a very worried man [and] put out feelers and floated an insurance policy plan for Mara.... He signalled that he can help divide the Army to weaken Rabuka but he needed Indian assistance to obtain arms for this divided Army....

Rabuka suspected Mara and he strengthened his secret alliances... Taukei started to openly criticise Mara and demanded him removed on the grounds of corruption, etc. The stage was being set for Rabuka's third coup which was planned for April 1988 ... We quickly signalled to Mara... now [Rabuka] was sure that his inner circle had holes....

The question is, of course, how much credence does one give to Kahan's words? But then, why believe Rabuka's or Mara's version of events, if both may have a vested interest, for different reasons, in keeping the true story quiet? At the very least, Kahan's story demonstrates that the explanation for the arms shipments could quite possibly be more complicated than Scarr allows.

- <sup>28</sup> An indication of how far Fijian attitudes had come is given by a survey undertaken by A. C. Cato in the mid-1950s, when the Indian population, as a proportion of all people in Fiji, was at its peak. In many discussions with people of both races, Cato found that 63 per cent of Fijians expressed complete rejection of Indians and desired that none should remain in Fiji, and a further 25 per cent were opposed to Indians but willing to let them remain under conditions clearly favourable to Fijians. Furthermore, in 64 conversations with Fijians concerning the possibility of Fijians sharing power with Indians in an independent Fiji, 54 ruled it out completely (Cato 1955:17-19). There is no doubt that Fijians were far more tolerant of Indians by the 1980s, and it seems quite reasonable to expect this trend to have continued had the coup not occurred.
- <sup>29</sup> The terms of the coalition agreement were largely dictated by Labour (Robertson and Tamanisau 1989:212).
- <sup>30</sup> This deficiency has been addressed in more depth by William Sutherland, in his review of *Power and Prejudice* in *The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 28 (March 1990): 133.
- <sup>31</sup> Mention should be made here of a new work available at the time of going to press: William Sutherland's *Beyond the Politics of Race: An Alternative History of Fiji to 1992* (1992). Sutherland, to a degree not previously seen in similar projects, examines Fiji's history in class terms, making important and original points in the process. His class analysis of Fiji is more clearly argued and presented than those in the older works discussed in this chapter. As an explanation of the coup, however, (admittedly not the book's focus), his analysis contains some of the weaknesses pointed out here. Sutherland, in seeking to draw out the continuities in Fiji's class history, pays the events of May 1987 themselves relatively little attention. The resulting impression given is that the coup was largely a result of economic forces; and, as is the case to varying degrees in other works mentioned here, the traditional/chiefly aspects of Fiji's ruling class are less completely explained than the economic elements. Overall, however, Sutherland's book has much to recommend it, and his detailed chapter on post-coup developments (to May 1992) gives an insightful commentary on often confusing events.
- <sup>32</sup> The historical information which follows is based largely on a reading of two sources: Routledge (1985) and Campbell (1989).
- <sup>33</sup> The colonial administration did, however, attempt to minimize the effect on Fijian land ownership of deals between chiefs and unscrupulous white settlers. A Lands Commission was set up which

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reviewed all pre-Cession claims and returned about half of the area claimed by Europeans to Fijian ownership (Lawson 1987c:6).

<sup>34</sup> Routledge describes the extent of this intermarriage in today's Fiji. Mara is 'heir to the Fijian paramount line in the Lau Islands and the Tongan line established by Ma'afu'; both he and his wife, Adi Lady Lala, are 'direct descendants of the first Cakobau, as are also Ratu Sir George Cakobau, present Vunivalu of Bau and former Governor-General, and Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau... present Governor-General' (Routledge 1985: 220).

<sup>35</sup> Once the eventual independence of Fiji was seen as inevitable (given the world's changing political climate), the colonial government carefully groomed a number of chiefs to assume the mantle of power. Even the political system adopted, however, may not have totally satisfied the eastern chiefly elite. Lal has observed: 'when Ratu George Cakobau asked that Fiji be returned to Fijians, he meant, without a shadow of a doubt, Fijian chiefs. In fact, he himself along with Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, E. Vito Qiolevu and others reportedly petitioned the Queen in 1969 to do precisely that' (Lal 1988a:64).

<sup>36</sup> Lawson has noted that the paradoxes of Fiji's land system go back to the earliest days of the colony: 'So complex and various were existing land tenure practices that it was not until 1918 that the Native Lands Commission finally agreed to the designation of the *mataqali* as the unit through which ownership would be vested' (Lawson 1988a:7). By the 1940s, 'the practical universalization of the *mataqali* had been enforced so effectively by the administration that younger Fijians had inadequate concepts of their own genuinely traditional divisions' (*ibid.*: 8).

<sup>37</sup> The concentration of economic activity in the west (and the resulting need for access by foreign companies to land) may also have served to aggravate western commoners' grievances against their chiefs, as the following 1978 quotation from a Fijian sociologist demonstrates:

In the Western division we see many partnerships between leading chiefs and overseas companies. This is primarily because the chiefs aren't allowed to sell land, so the easy way for an overseas company to acquire land is through partnership with a chief, who usually becomes richer as a result. (Bolabola 1978:156).

Thus, commoner grievances, which as noted earlier are seen throughout Fiji, are probably particularly evident in the west.

<sup>38</sup> Sakeasi Butadroka is, on first examination, a perplexing character. He has been widely quoted as saying, on the day of the coup, 'Where is Kamisese Mara? Don't blame Bavadra, don't blame anybody, blame Kamisese Mara who sold Fiji....Mara, the bloody Judas Iscariot!' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988: 70). This was interpreted by some journalists at the time as evidence of Fijian outrage at Rabuka's action. Yet Butadroka came out in support of the coup, telling his party in July that 'All that I've been fighting for in the past seventeen years Rabuka has now won for Fijians' (Scarr 1988a:90). He was also, as previously mentioned, the one who moved in Parliament in 1977 that all Indians be expelled from Fiji. Butadroka has himself said, however, that 'telling Indians to get out of Fiji was just a political tactic to stir Fijian feelings and so force Ratu Mara to do something about the poverty in the Fijian settlements here' (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:47). He is consistently pro-Fijian *commoners* in his behaviour, and quite wary of chiefs. He has criticized post-coup developments which strengthen chiefly power for that reason, his FNP going so far as to call for the abolition of the chiefly system altogether (Lawson 1990:16). His outburst on 14 May 1987 has been amply explained by Scarr: Butadroka 'was attacking his aversion, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, for creating the 1970 Constitution, which made the coup necessary, in Butadroka's terms, by failing to hand the country back to the Fijians' (Scarr 1988a:90).



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- 39 This remark is especially perplexing when one notes that it was made by an Australian: Australia's states have very few linguistic and cultural differences, yet they vigorously pursue (and perpetuate) their separate interests.
- 40 Here it is particularly relevant to recall the earlier-noted degree of intermarriage between chiefly families throughout Fiji (particularly post-Cession), which resembles that of the royal families of nineteenth century Europe. A western chief may in fact be more closely related to eastern chiefs than to his own subjects.
- 41 The main reason for this move seems to be an agreement between the three existing confederacies that the presidency of the Republic will circulate between their paramount chiefs every five years. Among western chiefs there has been 'a strong feeling that the proposal would further marginalize the western traditional leadership' (Thomas 1990:137). Although the move for a fourth confederacy is a chiefly one, the Coalition has expressed support for the concept, as it would represent a more equitable distribution of power than exists at present (Sharma 1989:18).
- 42 The west is at present split between Kubuna and Burebasaga. Tovata is a wholly eastern confederacy. The east/west divide does not, however, represent a divide between Tovata on the east and Kubuna and Burebasaga on the west: the latter confederacies are both politically dominated by the east coast of Viti Levu, and their paramount chiefs are easterners. Hence the move by some western chiefs for a wholly western confederacy.
- 43 To again use the Australian states analogy, the parochial Tasmanian 'north-south divide' does not prevent a common interest from prevailing when Tasmania is dealing with the Commonwealth government or competing with mainland states.
- 44 The village was Viseisei, 15 kilometres from Nadi airport on the west coast of Viti Levu (Bain 1989:115).
- 45 Titles such as 'Tui' and 'Vunivalu' (which translates as 'warlord') are reserved for the highest chiefs in the hierarchical chiefly system. For example, the Tui Cakau, Ratu Ganiiau, and the Tui Nayau, Ratu Mara, are both paramount chiefs of their regions.
- 46 Ganiiau once asserted that the Vunivalu of Bau would be obeyed everywhere in Fiji without question (Keith-Reid 1982:16).
- 47 This was reported by Taniela Veitata, who did not identify the chief concerned (cited in *ibid.*: 139). Veitata was the Alliance MP who appeared in the description of the coup given in the Introduction.
- 48 That Scarr presents information useful in a custom framework, and then interprets it in a racial manner, must be attributed to a belief in what Lawson calls the 'Myth of Cultural Homogeneity', which is that all Fijians have identical interests. My discussion of this myth has been implicit throughout sections 2-4.
- 49 The Council of Chiefs was and is the highest of the Fijian community's deliberative bodies. But even it is not 'traditional' but 'customary': it had not existed before Cession, but 'apparently arose almost by accident when, at Gordon's installation as "supreme chief" of Fiji, he had used the occasion to consult with the *Rokos* (chiefs appointed as governors) who had assembled there from all over Fiji' (Lawson, 1987c:3).
- 50 During the early stages of the review process, the Constitutional Review Committee, 'weighted in favour of the Taukei Movement,...did not bother to breakdown the [800 written and 161 verbal submissions] or even to take note of majority support for the old constitution among Fijian submissions. Instead it focused entirely on the last submission, that from the chiefs' (Robertson and

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Tamanisan 1988:132). Its report of 21 August 1987 endorsed all of the chiefs' proposals except for the 'consensus' system of election (*ibid.*). Since Rabuka's second intervention, 'discussions regarding constitutional changes have taken place under a non-elected government without public consultation' (Prasad 1988:114).

<sup>51</sup> Former South Australian premier Don Dunstan was born in Fiji and is chairperson of the Fiji Independent News Service.

<sup>52</sup> The Great Council of Chiefs, prior to the coup, consisted of all 22 Fijian members of the (lower) House of Representatives, 15 members (8 chiefs and 7 others) appointed by the Minister for Fijian Affairs, and 2 or 3 representatives chosen by each of Fiji's 14 provincial councils. (These councils are Fijian bodies. The 14 provinces were set up by the colonial administration last century, and range widely in Fijian population from 4,462 in Namosi to 55,343 in Ba. The smaller councils are staunch supporters of the post-coup regime.) Since the coup the MHRs have been excluded from the Council of Chiefs. The Council determined on 9 June 1990 that in future it will consist of 42 members chosen by the provincial councils (i.e., three each) and a dozen drawn from and nominated by the government (Dunstan 1990).

<sup>53</sup> The remaining senator is chosen by the Council of Rotuma. Rotuma is a tiny Polynesian dependency of Fiji.

<sup>54</sup> The pre-coup electoral system is discussed in section 2 of this paper.

<sup>55</sup> This is an important point which has not featured to date in many analyses of the 1990 Constitution. Section 41(2) of Government of the Republic of Fiji, *Constitution of the Sovereign Democratic Republic of Fiji* (1990), states that:

For the purpose of electing the members of the House, voters shall be registered on one of four separate rolls, that is to say -

- (a) a roll of voters who are Fijians;
- (b) a roll of voters who are Indians;
- (c) a roll of voters who are Rotumans; and
- (d) a roll of voters who are neither Fijians, Indians nor Rotumans.

Seats are assigned to each roll as previously noted. An important distinction between the 1970 and 1990 constitutions is that 'Fijians' are no longer defined as all Fijians, but rather, as all Fijians 'registered or eligible to be registered in the Vola ni Kawa Bula' (Section 156(a)). Those Fijians remaining will therefore go onto the fourth roll (see also *Pacific Islands Monthly* August 1990, p.13).

<sup>56</sup> See an earlier footnote for an explanation of why Scarr presents this custom information in a racial framework.

<sup>57</sup> The leasing system has produced a similar result. Van Fossen notes that 'the Fijian Administration leases land to Indians only for short periods, on the understanding that it will eventually revert to supporting the traditional [chiefly] conception of rural life'. But that same policy is destroying Fijians' land: 'Since Indians... have little incentive to develop the land under these conditions, there is severe erosion and poor conservation' (Van Fossen 1987:21).

<sup>58</sup> Owen Wilkes is a member of the Peace Movement Aotearoa. His article, 'U.S. Involvement in the Fiji Coup', appeared in *Peacelink and Wellington Pacific Report*.

<sup>59</sup> This suspension was not, however, complete: the American Peace Corps programme continued, as did funding of some other projects (Howard 1990:18).

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- <sup>60</sup> Premdas's discussion of internal factors is probably best categorized as racial. While Premdas does point to the likely role played by important Alliance figures, and does demonstrate that many Fijian fears were unfounded, he seems largely to accept the 'myth of cultural homogeneity', and stresses the clash of Fijians and Indians somewhat more than class or custom. He discusses many conflicting explanations, however, and is not as readily pigeonholed as Scarr, Roy, or West.
- <sup>61</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Jim Sanday was second-in-command of the RFMF at the time of the coup. He now resides in Australia.
- <sup>62</sup> Fijian soldiers stationed on UN peace-keeping duty in the Middle East seem to have been less strongly socialized in Alliance and chiefly values; over half of them voted for the Coalition in the election (Dean and Ritova 1988:34).
- <sup>63</sup> Robie, however, relays 'persistent stories' that several officers opposed the coup, and says 'some soldiers were reportedly detained because of their refusal to follow Rabuka's leadership' (1989:229).
- <sup>64</sup> See chapter 4 for a discussion of the second intervention, and Ganilan's and Mara's roles.
- <sup>65</sup> Cameron's letter (not actually published by *The Bulletin* until after the second intervention) is reproduced in Robie (1989:243-44).
- <sup>66</sup> The opinion of New Zealand's ex prime minister is reported in Robertson and Tamanisau (1988:94).
- <sup>67</sup> Allegedly corrupt Alliance members included Apisai Tora (see Saffu, 1989:16) and Peter Stinson (Jim Anthony, speaking on Judy Fasher, 'Tuesday Despatch: The Fiji Military Coup', ABC Radio, 19 May 1987, transcript, Parliamentary Library, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, p.10). Tora was an ex-minister, a leader of the Taukei Movement, and later minister in the Republic. Stinson, also an ex-minister, stood prominently next to Rabuka at the first post-coup press conference (Alley 1987:491), and joined Rabuka's 15 May Council of Ministers (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:71).
- <sup>68</sup> The correct spelling is 'Marela'.
- <sup>69</sup> It is also interesting to note that the army's corruption inquiry preceded a Tankei Movement campaign for the removal of Mara on corruption grounds. Rabuka allegedly instigated this campaign to put pressure on Mara as part of a power struggle between the two. (See Mohammed Kahan's allegations in section 2, this paper.)
- <sup>70</sup> For a discussion of distinctive aspects of Pacific political systems, see Fry (1983).
- <sup>71</sup> A starting point in this literature is Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). Other key discussions are Babadzan (1988); Keesing (1989); Linnekin and Poyer (1990); Jolly (1992); Thomas (forthcoming).
- <sup>72</sup> One reason why I have used the term 'custom' through most of this paper is to avoid the ambiguity surrounding the term 'tradition' (see section 1).
- <sup>73</sup> Such systems do leave parts of society under- or unrepresented; but viewed from a Lockean 'social contract' perspective, they may have validity. The society may be considered to have developed as if, at some stage, its people had unanimously agreed to adopt the system favoured by the majority, that majority then choosing a custom-style system. This view does overlook the phenomenon of such systems being forcibly adapted by, or incorporated into liberal democratic systems by, colonial powers. But even in these cases, a demonstration by a society of support for its new hybrid system (for example, through a referendum at independence) can, from a Lockean perspective, bestow validity upon it.
- <sup>74</sup> Despite the indentured labour system, they did choose to stay at the end of their indenture.

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