

Fiji electoral dialogue

Disunity through diversity? The contours of Fiji's post-putsch elections

Jon Fraenkel

School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific

Discerning the 'popular will' has, over the last year in Fiji, become a talisman for demagogues and diplomats, judges, ministers and military leaders. When George Speight marched into Fiji's parliament on 19 May 2000 and removed the elected 'People's Coalition' government from office, he claimed the 'support of the Vanua' ('people of the land' or 'indigenous people'), as did the military, during June and July, as they held out against the attempted coup. Deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry claimed a broader 'mandate' to rule for four more years, but when his position as Labour leader was threatened, switched to acknowledging the need for a 'fresh mandate'. The decision by Fiji's Court of Appeal to uphold the 1997 constitution centred crucially on the absence of state evidence demonstrating 'acquiescence' under the military-imposed interim administration of Laisenia Qarase.¹ In one way or another, Fiji's protracted political crisis has been focussed around rival claims about who or what has popular backing, claims that will be tested if elections, scheduled for August 2001, go ahead.²

Fiji's next elections will be conducted again under the controversial compulsory preferential voting system, with a 'ticket' option on the ballot paper that effectively forces political parties to enter into electoral

alliances.³ In 1999, 92 per cent of voters followed party tickets, giving party officials extraordinary power over the redistribution of preference votes. In nearly half of all constituency contests, outcomes were decided by counting such preference votes. In nearly a quarter of all contests, first count leaders were overtaken, at the final count, by candidates drawing on re-allocated preferences. The election was the most disproportionate in Fiji's post-independence history, in terms of the average discrepancy between votes secured and seats obtained by political parties (Table 1). A second election under the system is likely to see some fall in the number of voters backing party 'tickets', and, perhaps, greater caution by party officials regarding preference-rankings. But if, as is likely, a large number of parties contest the election, redistribution of preference votes will again prove highly important.

In the May 1999 elections, registration and voting were compulsory, and backed by the threat of F\$50 fines, resulting in a large increase in numbers on the electoral roll and a 90 per cent turnout. Fiji's Elections Office plans to re-use the 1999 rolls, although provision has been made for the addition of some 42,000 who have come of age since the previous polls. Since no citizens were prosecuted for failure to register or vote last

Policy dialogue

Table 1 **Disproportionality in elections, 1966–99**

1966	10.0
1972	6.0
1977 (April)	4.9
1977 (September)	16.7
1982	3.5
1987	5.5
1992	7.9
1994	9.7
1999	19.3 (16.6 ¹)

¹Adjusted to a final, rather than first, count basis.

Notes: Disproportionality is calculated using Gallagher's index (G), $G = \sqrt{\frac{1}{2} \sum (V_i - S_i)}$ where V_i is the percentage of votes, and S_i is the percentage of seats, secured by each political party (see Gallagher 1991).

Sources: *Fiji Times* 11 October 1966, 3 May 1972, 7 April 1977, 26 Sept 1977, 19 July 1982, 13 April 1987, 1 June 1992, 28 February 1994; Fiji Elections Office, 1999. *Elections '99: results by the count*, Suva.

time around, a fall in the turnout is likely, a decline perhaps also reinforced by the experience of the forced removal of the elected government in May 2000. The forthcoming election is anticipated to be a costly affair; estimated at around F\$10 million, considerably above the figures for 1994 and 1999.

Under the 1997 constitution, Fiji's parliament has 71 members. Over half of the seats (46) are 'reserved' for the separate ethnic groups: Indo-Fijians elect 19 MPs on communal rolls, ethnic Fijians elect 23 communal members, 'General' voters (comprising Europeans, part-Europeans, Chinese and other Pacific islanders) have 3 seats and one seat goes to the representatives from the remote Polynesian island of Rotuma.

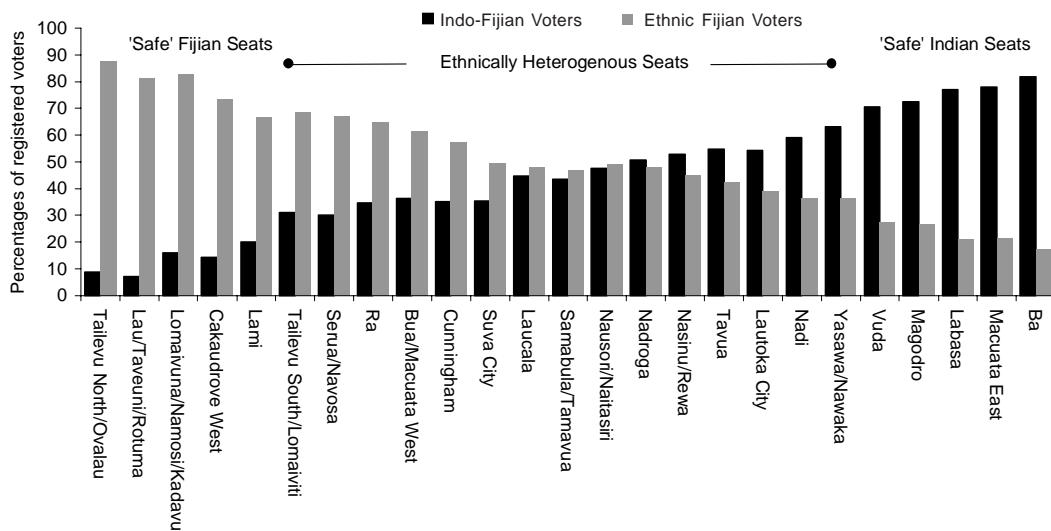
In addition, there are 25 'open' franchise constituencies, where all registered voters cast their votes together. Voters all have two votes; one in a 'communal' constituency and the other in one of the 'open' constituencies.

Fiji has never had any significant multi-ethnic political party able to command support from different ethnic groups anywhere near their shares in the electorate (50.4 per cent Fijian, 45.2 per cent Indian and 4.4 per cent other in 1999). Since independence, no predominantly ethnic Fijian backed party has ever been able to win an Indian communal constituency and no largely Indian-supported party has ever been able to secure any Fijian reserved seat. Under the partially open franchise electoral systems of 1970–87 and 1999, elections have effectively involved separate polls conducted amongst Fijians, Indians and general voters, with communal voting patterns broadly carried over into the open-franchise contests, a pattern likely to be repeated at the forthcoming elections. Under the new post-1997 electoral system, however, many contests in the open constituencies are likely to be decided by re-distributed second or lower preferences, introducing a degree of uncertainty, and even potentially some arbitrariness, into electoral outcomes in marginal seats.⁴

The National Federation Party (NFP) and Fiji Labour Party (FLP) and its offshoots will again battle for the 19 Indian reserved constituencies, with the five predominantly Indo-Fijian open constituencies (Figure 1 effectively acting as additional Indian reserved constituencies. In May 1999, the FLP obtained 66 per cent of the Indian vote, and obtained a clean sweep of all these seats. The FLP's support among farmers in the sugar cane belts of Western Viti Levu remains strong. The Fiji Sugar Cane Growers Council elections on 5 May, pitting the FLP-backed and Chaudhry-led National Farmers' Union against the NFP-backed Fiji Cane Growers Association, has been widely depicted as a dry-run for the August polls.⁵ Yet the NFP's

Policy dialogue

Figure 1 Ethnic profile of the Open Constituencies



Note: Ethnically safe seats defined as those where one ethnic group forms at least 70 per cent of the electorate.

Source: Fiji Elections Office, 1999. *Registered Voters by Constituency, Suva.*

strength back in 1992 and 1994 was largely outside the sugar cane belts, in the urban areas and in eastern Viti Levu. These parts of the country have witnessed large-scale Indian out-migration, particularly among middle class Indo-Fijian NFP supporters. These areas have also borne the brunt of the instability during the Speight's attempted coup. The NFP will need to perform strongly here if it is to experience any revival.

Even if the Mahendra Chaudhry-led FLP repeats its landslide majority among Indo-Fijian voters, a recurrence of 1999's absolute majority (37 out of 71 seats) is unlikely. In 1999, FLP victories in 13 crucial open seats relied on preference votes transferred from three Fijian parties: the Party of National Unity (PANU), Fijian Association Party (FAP) and Veitokani Lewenivanua Vakarisito (VLV/Christian Democratic Alliance) (see Fraenkel 2001). During Chaudhry's controversial term in office, all these parties split. PANU General Secretary, Apisai Toru,

became leader of the *Taukei* movement against the People's Coalition government and is currently trying to form a new anti-Chaudhry party in Western Viti Levu. FAP MPs from eastern Viti Levu rebelled against their party leader, Adi Kuini Speed, and, along with most rank and file VLV supporters, joined the opposition. Some FAP parliamentarians figured amongst Speight's most ardent supporters. Several Fijian People's Coalition ministers who remained loyal to Chaudhry's government have not been re-selected, and most Fijian parties are likely to stack their preferences against the FLP. Chaudhry's premiership will itself inevitably be a key election issue during the forthcoming campaign.

Since the days of majority Fijian backing for the Alliance Party (1970-87) and, after the 1987 coup, for the Great Council of Chiefs-sponsored *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT), numerous new Fijian parties have emerged. At the 1999 elections, five

Policy dialogue

parties were able to secure over 9 per cent of the Fijian vote. All have subsequently experienced further divisions. The SVT has been dropped as the official chief's party. Its efforts to bring together parties under the banner of a 'Fijian Forum' have been plagued by faction-fighting, as has the Great Council of Chiefs itself. Verata chief, Ratu Ilisoni Qio Ravoka, recently described deliberations at the Chiefs' Council as marked by 'personal differences, backstabbing, *vanua* rivalry, political rivalry, jealousy and traditional power struggle' (*Fiji Times*, 9 March 2001). Rebel chiefs from Vanua Levu, who backed the mutiny at the Sukunaivalu Barracks in Labasa in July 2000, have applied to register a new 'Conservative Alliance Matanitu Party' with Speight himself as President.⁶ The extent of support for an extremist pro-Speight party is one of the big uncertainties in the forthcoming elections.⁷ The response flagged at a meeting of the Great Council of Chiefs in late April, a retreat into provincialism and move away from the party system, is unlikely to heal divisions.

In the run-up to the polls, greater top-level pressure towards 'Fijian unity' is likely. Already infighting among Fijian parties has accelerated the engagement of Fiji's traditional chiefs in politics as intended bearers of provincial unity. In the provinces of Namosi and Macuata, high-ranking chiefs have been selected as candidates, and guided to only later choose their party affiliations. Caretaker Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase has received the blessing of the still powerful former President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara to stand in the safe Lau Fijian seat. In a bid to retain the premiership, Qarase has initiated a constitutional review process aimed at providing a 'safety-valve' for indigenous discontent and government funds have been lavished on a pro-Fijian blue-print, including plans for the construction of a tar-sealed road through the rebellious province of Tailevu, near Speight's home area of Wainibuka. Qarase's new party, formed under the

auspices of Naitasiri's high chief, Ratu Inoke Takiveikata and bringing together many ministers in the Caretaker Government, is likely to be a strong contender for the Fijian vote. No matter how deeply split, Fijian parties will divide up the 23 Fijian 'reserved' seats and are virtually guaranteed at least four of the predominantly ethnic Fijian outer-island open constituencies (Figure 1).

In the contest for the three 'General' reserved seats, newly elected United General Party President, Mick Beddoes, is engaged in unity talks with the rival General Voters Party. He has also teamed up with a loose grouping of Fijian 'moderates': FAP leader Adi Kuini Speed, former SVT leader and Prime Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka, the FLP's Dr Tupeni Baba and PANU leader, Ponipate Lesavua. The group's declared support for a 'grand coalition', aimed at rehabilitating the Rabuka-Reddy doctrine of 'unity through diversity', depends upon obtaining strong backing in both the Fijian and Indo-Fijian reserved constituencies (on the grounds that 'the communal pulls are too strong' for a truly multi-ethnic party—former NFP leader, Jai Ram Reddy, 1992, cited in Fraenkel 2000b). Yet Indo-Fijian leaders of the FLP have distanced themselves from Baba (*Fiji Sun*, 20 April 2001), and Rabuka, who was recently dropped as Chairman of the Great Council of Chiefs, is unlikely to face an easy task in pulling the SVT back towards the centre of the political spectrum. The other alternatives are a deal with the NFP, which desperately needs some alliance with moderate Fijians, or a new national-level multi-ethnic party or coalition. The preferential voting system was intended precisely to encourage such moderate groupings, but their chances of becoming at least a small, but influential, force in parliament would probably have been greater under list system proportional representation.

Fiji's politics remains, at present, polarised between one side that upholds the 1997 constitution, but without re-engaging

Policy dialogue

in the process of élite conciliation that underpinned that accord, and another side that wants to revert to the ultimately unsustainable 1990-type constitutional arrangements aimed at permanently institutionalising indigenous Fijian political paramourcy.

Notes

- ¹ Republic of Fiji vs Chandrika Prasad, Civil Appeal No ABU0078/2000S, Judgment, 1 March 2001.
- ² The legality of President Ratu Josefa Iloilo's call for fresh elections is the subject of a legal challenge spearheaded by the Citizens' Constitutional Forum, on the grounds that the constitutional course was rather to recall the former parliament.
- ³ Where votes are cast 'above the line', by ticking next to a party symbol, voters' first and subsequent preferences are determined by party-specified rankings submitted to Fiji's Elections Office. If a party does not submit these, it forfeits the opportunity to have its symbol printed on the ballot paper, effectively depriving it of 'above the line' votes. To refuse to submit preferences is therefore to risk being consigned to political oblivion.
- ⁴ For example, the lone Indo-Fijian minister in Laisenia Qarase's caretaker administration, independent candidate George Shui Raj, was elected in the Ra open constituency, despite obtaining only 15 per cent of the first count vote. Three indigenous Fijian parties listed him as second preference, principally to avoid transferring preferences to parties who were considered to pose a greater threat, with the result that Raj was elected on the fifth and final count. Contests in two other key marginal constituencies were determined by party-specified seventh and ninth ranked preferences.
- ⁵ Fiji Cane Growers Association General Secretary, Bala Dass, in *Fiji Times*, 2 April, 2001.
- ⁶ *Fiji Times* 25 March 2001, *Fiji Sun*, 26 April 2001. Fijian political rivalry is again intimately connected to the struggle over traditional chiefly titles, as, for example, in the dispute

for the prestigious *Tui Cakau* title. Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, who is currently facing charges for his role during the disturbances of July 2000, is the son of the former holder of the title. But his claims have been challenged by newly selected Great Council of Chiefs Chairman, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, who is backed by prominent members of the caretaker administration. For an indication of the significance of struggles for succession amongst the chiefs during Fiji's May 1999 election, and during the Speight crisis, see Tuimaleali'ifano (2000) and Fraenkel (2000a).

- ⁷ George Speight and key rebel supporters remain imprisoned on Nukulau Island awaiting committal to face treason charges before the High Court. No convictions, which would debar them from standing in the August polls, have as yet been secured against the rebel leaders.

References

- Fiji Elections Office, 1999. *Registered Voters by Constituency*, Suva.
- Fraenkel, J., 2000a. 'The clash of dynasties and the rise of demagogues; Fiji's *Tauri Vakaukauwa* of May 2000', *Journal of Pacific History*, 35(2):295–308.
- , 2000b. 'The triumph of the non-idealist intellectuals? An investigation of Fiji's 1999 election results', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 46(1):86–109.
- , 2001 (forthcoming). 'The alternative vote system in Fiji; electoral engineering or ballot-rigging?', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 39(2).
- Gallagher, M., 1991. 'Proportionality, disproportionality and electoral systems', *Electoral Studies*, 10(1):33–51.
- Tuimaleali'ifano, M., 2000. 'Veiqati Vaka Viti and the Fiji Islands elections in 1999', *Journal of Pacific History*, 35(2):253–67.